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THE  
RED SAILOR



# THE RED SAILOR

PATRICK O'HARA



NEVILLE SPEARMAN  
LONDON 1903

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It was warm, so warm, shut in, like the air cut off too; one of those nights that instead of getting cool as the sun goes down, gets warmer and warmer, till you do not think it could be so warm. Lying on a bunk was a sailor, a very low sailor, without even one foot on the bottom rung of the social ladder. The sailor wore only dungaree trousers and lay staring at the white canvas cover on the hammock mattress on the spring on the bunk above, and all the while feeling the sweat come out on his back and his back itching on the blanket, and thinking that it was going to get warmer and warmer and that you could not be worse off shovelling bunkers for Old Nick himself.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. The only place worth being on a night like this is in one those boozers down South-sea. Or in one those boozers on Commercial Road. Or . . . or any place really, so long as it's a boozer you're stood in with one elbow on the counter and the other tipping bloody great wets down your neck. And Scotch Annie. Good old Annie. Big Lill too—the Bootnecks delight. Feet go where you like, I'm going home. And slapping those arses lined up along the counter. A grope at Lill too . . . no, you'd be hard put to grope that. And them looking at you that way when you came in—trying to guess how much you're worth because it is blank week and there's not a matelot alive got a bastard light. Give us a feel till Friday. Funny thing about arses. They don't look it but when you slap them it's like slapping a cardboard box. They're not all like that though. Just those wearing stays. It's the bones in them. You even see the bones poking out the way they stand sometimes. Same with roll-ons. Take them off and they got funny patterns imprinted all over them. Some those sadist fellows sit there all night

with biros doing crosswords. Yes, sir. But you're not there tonight. No, sir. You forgotten what a wet tastes like. Even Big Lill. Though nobody should ever forget what she looks like. Thirty-nine more nights to go and all you can look forward to is sweating your bastard guts out thinking about boozers and wets and whores with cardboard arses. It's just your luck that the morning you get out this hole the Russians send along a little airplane to drop a bomb to blow the whores and boozers all to kingdom come before you even set foot on old Commercial Road. The only place left standing would be Aggie Weston's Rest Home and her stood out front on the top step telling St. Peter how many Three Badge F.A.s signed the pledge the day before. Peace on earth and goodwill to all men. And the same to you with knobs on. Yes, sir. That square of sunlight coming in the window is way up near the ceiling now, just above the door. The more you look at it the more it looks like a lump of red hot iron . . . ready to flatten Benson when he opens the door. Another inch and that lump of iron is going to touch the ceiling. You count slowly, real slowly, how much could you reach before it touched? You could count a hundred. You could count ten bloody hundred, matey. You could count till Nelson got up and sang *Roll on my Doz* and it still wouldn't touch. It's never touched while you've been here. It's never touched while any other bastard has been here either. No, sir. It gets right up close to the ceiling and the sun snuffs it. They built the bloody dockyard wall too high. That's what they've done. That's consideration for you. One day they're going to lock some poor bastard up in here and he'll go bonkers counting. Yes, sir.

It was so quiet James Varne could hear himself breathe, and with every breath he breathed the smell of bootpolish and soft-soap and metal-polish; and altogether the whole combination of smells of military cleanliness, and the smell of the water in the dock coming in the window. It is really amazing the impressions you can draw from such a simple thing as a smell. You could get a bad name just through a little smell. Like the Royal Naval Detention Barracks, Portsmouth. It had a bad name. It stank. It stank right down to the last brick. Yes, sir.

'What a bastard.'

'Huh! What?' said Telegraphist Parker waking to the words. Varne lay still. Sparky Parker, leaning on one elbow and looking at him from the single bunk the other side of the cell said:

'Hey! What you say, Varney?'

'Nothing. I'm thinking.'

'What you thinking about, Varney?'

'Nothing. Just thinking.'

'You know, this spring's cutting my arse to ribbons.' He did not know what it was to give up easy. 'You hear me, Varney?'

'Yeah, I hear you,' said Varne staring at the white canvas cover on the hammock mattress on the spring on the bunk above.

'They want to get real mattresses for these bunks. Not make you use the one out your mick. They're too bleedin' thin, mate.'

'You got it all worked out.'

'It's only logical.'

'It's what?' said Varne looking at him for the first time.

'Logical.' Pleased with his command of the language.

'Oh, yeah. Yeah, logical,' said Varne back to staring.

'Another month of this lot and I'll be round the bleedin' bend, mate,' said Sparky sitting up and putting both feet on the floor. 'Yeah, that's what I'll be. Stone bleedin' bonkers. Number! Number! Left, right! Left, right! Then round and round that bleedin' assault course till your bastard legs are worn down to your knees.'

'You'll get used to it.'

'Used to it? Like bleedin' hell. You won't see me here again. I tell you, mate.'

'No?' said Varne now looking at him.

'No.'

'That's what I said. Once.'

'Aaaawh! You're different. Nobody takes it out on you. It's fellows like me who get it all. Always they pick on somebody they're not windy of.'

'It's only a matter of mind,' said Varne contemplating one bare foot down the end of the bunk.

'Who you kidding? Mind over matter my arse.'

Out on the dock the high whoop-whoop-whoop of a

destroyer's siren. The sky pale blue and very high and clean-looking against the steel bars on the window. It seemed twice as quiet with the echoing of the siren stopped.

James Varne lay looking over his head at the sky between the bars on the window and wondering what it would be to be a bird and fly up there with no one around.

'Where's the kid?' Sparky, suddenly.

Varne, quiet a moment, then flying back from a long long way away:

'You, what?'

'The kid. Should have been back by now.'

'He'll be all right. Nobody ever escapes from here. England's Devil's Island.'

'He should have been back by now,' said Sparky rising and pacing up and down the narrow space between the bunks on his bare feet. Varne lying quiet and listening to the slap slap slap of the bare feet on the polished wooden floor and thinking somehow of a beach with no one about and the water lapping on yellow sand and blue far out and the sun on it and it blue and gold.

'Hey!' said Sparky stopping between the bunks and looking down at Varne on the beach in the sun, 'Hear me?'

'They'll have him taking the cai round. Now go and lay down before you collapse from exhaustion.'

'Yeah maybe. You know?' Sparky said going on and beginning the pacing again. 'He's funny that kid. When he came in I thought he was snaps.'

'Never thought about it,' said Varne wiping sweat off his chest with a towel lying alongside of him. 'Going to be hot again tonight. This hole is not much good without being able to sleep. I once heard a story about a fellow who fell asleep and woke up an old man. It's literature. Can't remember his name.'

'Rip Van Twinkle. That's who it was,' said Sparky stopped pacing and looking pleased with himself. 'You know what he got his ninety days for?'

'He got ninety days?'

'Who you talking about?' Sparky said looking annoyed.

'Rip Van Twinkle.' Varne without a smile.

'Why don't you stop arsing around for once? I said: You know what the kid got his ninety days for?'



'Never asked him. Never ask anybody anything.'

'Well, he got it for stopping over leave because his mother was sick. A bleedin' liberty, that's what it is.'

Varne turning on his side to face the open space between the bunks:

'He should have come back and seen the sky pilot.'

'She might have bleedin' died before the sky pilot did anything.'

'That's sky pilots for you,' said Varne, 'when the time comes you ask a sky pilot for anything you must be in a pretty bad way. Then it probably wouldn't do much good. I never met anybody back to say what they seen the other side yet. Till that happens sky pilots stay right the bottom of the list.'

'It's a liberty all the same. Something should be done. Kids like him shouldn't be locked up in places like this.'

'If your mother had the right man you would have gone a long way,' said Varne turning on his back.

'What the hell you coming now?' said Sparky almost aggressive.

'There's some pretty important people would give their right arms for the gas you got,' Varne said staring.

'Oughf! You got no feelings. That's your trouble,' said Sparky. 'You got nothing here,' touching his head. 'It's all there,' bending his arm and gripping his bicep.

Outside was the sound of footsteps coming along the landing, the scuffing of canvas shoes and the clipping of steel-tipped boots. Varne and Parker grabbed buckets from under their bunks and began polishing them with cloths. Chief Regulating Petty Officer Benson unlocked the door, crashed it back on its hinges, hurling the boy inside and slamming the door on the rebound.

'Jesus Christ! What they done to you?' said Sparky dropping his bucket.

The boy came back off the end of the double bunk, his face in his hands and blood on them, not a great deal, but enough. Varne and Parker looking at him and him taking the towel off the end of his bunk and holding it to his mouth.

'Christ Almighty!' said Sparky. 'See his mouth?'

'Shut up,' said Varne.

'But Jesus Christ——'

'Shut up I said,' said Varne nodding towards the door and starting to polish again.

Outside was the clipping of boots coming back along the landing, then stopping outside the door and an eye at the peephole. 'Worrall! Get mobile!' said the voice outside of the door.

Benson. Always it was Benson. Benson, said Varne, was a curse on the human race. Varne was a fellow pretty near always right in his judgement too. Anyhow, everyone agreed with what he said about Benson.

The boy put the towel back and took a mess fanny out from under Varne's bunk.

'That's right, Worrall. That's dead right. Now get mobile,' said the voice outside of the door.

Almost the moment the eye disappeared from the peephole a whistle blew downstairs signalling the end of the evening task period. Varne put the bucket under his bunk and without looking at the boy said: 'Put it back now. Just get up and lay on your bunk a while.'

Outside it was quiet and the boy on his bunk sobbing quietly, and him only a few months over eighteen and happily not forgotten how it is to cry. Too many people grow too quickly beyond the joy of crying. Tears on one's face is to be joyful and not ashamed. It goes almost to the soul. James Varne, even if he wished, could not have remembered when last he cried.

Through the small high window was the faraway sound of someone shouting through a loud hailer.

Yes, sir, James Varne thought. Pigs. A cutter come to take pigs and their pushers out to a cocktail party on some cruiser lying midstream. That's all most pigs are good for, soaking up pink gin and trunking pushers in their cabins. Yes, sir.

Outside the day-shift patrolmen were walking across the barrack yard, one of them laughing and their boots crunching on the grit on the tarmac.

'Lucky bastards!' said Sparky. 'They're going out to get pissed now. Then they'll go shacking-up with some pusher up Fratton way and come back in the morning thumping everybody in sight and running them in afterwards. The bastards. I hope they get clap.'

Down in the hall someone blew a whistle, the noise echoing round and round the empty landings. Varne got up and took the mugs off the shelf under the window.

'Here!' he said and threw Sparky a mug.

He caught it and jumped off his bunk, his heel slipping and him going down on his back and his head hitting the floor.

'Now you gone and woke up,' said Varne grinning.

'Yeah, yeah,' Sparky said sitting up and rubbing the back of his head, 'Mind over matter. That's all. Who else but this lot could have thought of polishing the floor with bastard boot-polish?'

Suddenly the door was open and Benson looking at the two low sailors on their feet and the other on his bunk. 'On your feet, Worrall. You're not dead yet.'

'Why don't you lay off for a while, Benson?' said Varne, standing very large between the bunks, sweat glistening on his chest and shoulders.

'That's enough out of you, Varne. You're too bloody big for your boots. One day I'll have you—proper,' Benson said, very confident outside of the door. And to Worrall: 'When I say: "On your feet," you're on your feet. Quick! And you better be on them when the officer of the day comes round.'

'Yes, sir,' said the boy at attention in front of Varne, and Varne standing easily and those eyes, very blue, on Benson.

'Why don't you go out and get knocked down by a bus?' said Varne, the eyes never moving.

'You got a lot to learn yet, Worrall,' said Benson not looking at Varne.

A prisoner from one of the cells down the landing came and poured cocoa into the mugs from a steel fanny shined till it looked silver-plated.

'Close the door, Varne,' said Benson looking at him that way with his mouth all up at one side and down at the other.

Yes, sir, James Varne thought. One day I'll fix your mouth for you. Fix it right. One day I'll put your kisser where it suits you, Benson. Yes, sir.

'What you waiting for? Close it,' said Benson now stood out on the landing with his back against the rail and still looking at Varne that way.

Varne went across and kicked the door shut, then gave

the boy his mug. The boy was trembling and his top lip swollen right out and cut one corner.

'Forget about him. Try hard enough you forget about everything in time,' said Varne sat on the edge of his bunk sipping the cocoa.

'Cai!' said Sparky. 'Call this bleedin' cai? Piss! That's what it is, mate.'

'You were born with a drip on,' said Varne.

'What I'd give for a couple of wets up the Albany right now. You ever drink there, Varney?'

'Sometimes,' he said staring at the floor.

'You got done for scrapping with the patrol in one of those boozers on the Road, didn't you?'

'That was down Southsea,' he said paying no particular attention.

'The Flaming Arsehole?'

'No. Down on the front.'

'That place where you go down steps? By the dance-hall?'

'Yeah, that's it.'

'Isn't that funny now. I once picked up this pusher in there. About forty-five she was. Had a pair of tits out here,' Sparky said putting his hands way out front of his chest and forgetting about how bad the cocoa was. 'I trunked her in the doorway of this pie and eel shop behind the boozier. Not a bad rattle either, mate. Told me later she had seven sprogs and her old man played the big drum in the Bootneck band. You wouldn't have knowed it. The sprogs, I mean.'

The boy laughed: 'Is that true?'

'Of course it's true. You think I'm a Three Badge F.A.?''

'No, no, nothing like that,' said the boy quietly and not looking at either of the sailors.

'I bet a quid you never even seen the glossy glass, mate.' Sparky lying on his bunk said.

'The what?' said the boy sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bunk.

'You hear that, Varney? Never heard of it. He doesn't even know what it's like.'

'You tell me then.'

'Ask Varney. He knows it all. He studs the Duchess of Kent's Cow Palace.'

'The what?' said the boy.

'The Cow Palace—Wren's Barracks. Across the road from the Ranch House. That's the N.A.A.F.I.'

'You tell me then, Varney,' said the boy. The mouth almost a grin.

'Sparky'll tell you. He's got the clap medal and bar.'

'Well,' said Sparky all condescendingly, 'Sometimes it's like a jar of worms and sometimes it's like standing in a lobby with the door open.'

The boy lay on his bunk laughing.

'You thinking of trying it when you get out?' said Sparky. 'I'll tell you a couple of good boozers where you can't go wrong.'

'I don't drink.'

'Don't drink. You hear that, Varney? He doesn't drink. Doesn't go with pushers and always back aboard by midnight. In that case you better go down Southsea Fun Fair and buy the little girls candy floss.'

'Candy floss,' said the boy. 'What for?'

'Different values,' said Varne. 'Different pushers have different values. Sometimes it's clothes. Sometimes it's gin. Sometimes it's only money. Candy floss even.'

'I thought it was for love,' the boy said looking down at him.

'You been reading too many books,' said Varne. 'Every pusher's got a value. Of course, sometimes you get one who does it just for friends. They haven't got an enemy in the whole bastard world.' And to Sparky, 'Tell him about the Med, Sparky.'

'The Gut, you mean?'

'Yeah, tell him about the Gut.'

'You been out the Med yet?' Sparky said.

'I haven't been to sea yet,' the boy said finding the bottom of his mug awfully interesting. 'I only just came down from *Royal Arthur*.'

'How long you sign on for?' Varne asked.

'Twelve,' said the boy still peering in the mug.

'Bleedin' hell,' said Sparky. 'One born every minute.'

'At that time I just thought I'd like it,' said the boy quietly.

Sparky laughed: 'That's what the pusher said to the Boot-neck. No kidding though. You must be bleedin' bonkers. What you want to do is work your ticket. Tell them you

piss the bed or something. They say that works. Start in the morning. I'll give you a shout before they come round.'

'That's right,' said Varne. 'Do that. Work your ticket and go home and do what all boys should do for their mothers. Buy her a telly or a fur coat, then marry the pusher next door and have a dozen sprogs and work the skin off your arse digging drains to feed them. Then they'll say you're a respectable citizen. Build your own world and forget about the one outside. Don't learn about values. Values are better forgotten about.'

Down in the hall a whistle blew. The three sailors got off their bunks and went across and stood at ease with their backs against the wooden shelf under the window, all according to regulations. With a prisoner's back that close to the wall it was thought next to impossible for him to throw anything at the staff when they opened the door.

Yes, sir, James Varne thought. The Imperial Navy thinks about everything. Up in Whitehall they have little men who sit at big desks and think about all these things. Yes, sir.

Benson opened the door. 'Prisoners, shunnn!' he yelled. 'Any complaints for the officer of the day?'

A lieutenant-commander looked in the door. He wore evening dress and a black bow tie and smelled very sweet even from that distance.

'No complaints, sir,' answered the three low sailors according to regulations thought up by the little men in Whitehall for prisoners with their backs to the wall and without complaints for the officer of the day. The lieutenant-commander looked at a sheaf of papers he carried, then nodded to Benson in the manner all officers of the Imperial Navy are supposed to nod. Benson pulled the door shut and they went on to the next cell.

When they had gone, Varne got on his knees and took something from under the cover of his mattress.

'What you got, Varney?' said Sparky. 'The key of the front door.' Varne handed them each a Blue-line cigarette.

'Christ. A real bleedin' fag,' said Sparky holding it close to his nose and looking at it cross-eyed. 'I know who gave you these,' grinning. 'It's that tiffy down the bay. Old doc, that's who it was. Bleedin' beef he is. Know it a mile away. It's the way he looks at you.'

'You're particular all of a sudden. I know, you suddenly got morals.'

'Forget it. What the hell do I care? They're his fags. He can do what he likes with them.'

Afterward when they had lit the cigarettes they lay on their bunks smoking and not talking. Outside of the window the last light of the sun had gone. The sky was washed pale with blue, almost clear, like ice, and high up hazed with the heat. There were no stars and the moon had not yet come up.

'What you think that pig had our names on those papers for?' Sparky said to no one at all, but generally.

'Yes,' said the boy. 'Did you see him nodding?'

'What about it, Varney?'

'They're going to take us out and shoot us at daylight. They always shoot prisoners at daylight,' said Varne.

'My arse!' said Sparky. 'We're on the mat for something. You see in the morning. We'll be running round and round that assault course with a load of bastard bricks on our backs.'

Varne put his cigarette out and put the end back under his mattress.

'You really think we're in the rattle?' the boy asked.

'We're going to find out in the morning. Hurry things up this way and you'll be dead and gone before you know it. Let it happen first,' said Varne and turned over and faced the wall.

Someone had turned the light on. Varne put his hand up against the glare and looked backward out the window. It was dark out and very quiet. Then the sound of steel-tipped boots on the landing. He looked across at Sparky and found him peering out from under the blanket.

'Somebody's put the light on,' Sparky said softly.

'You think I'm blind?'

'What they doing?'

'They're not going to wait till daylight. They're going to take us out and shoot us now.'

'For Christsake.'

Above Varne the spring bulged.

'What's happening?' The boy, his head over the side of the bunk and his eyes large. 'There's a lot of them outside. I heard them coming in the yard.'

'How long ago?' asked Varne sitting up and pushing the blond hair back off his forehead.

'About quarter of an hour, twenty minutes ago,' the boy said still surprised-looking.

'I don't know. Never anything like this the times before.'

Outside was someone coming all the way along the landing.

'It's a right carry-on, I tell you,' said Sparky.

The footsteps stopped outside of the door and there was a rattle of keys and the door swung open. A petty officer of the night staff put his head in the door and looked at them watching him, then looking at a paper in his hand and trying to appear very mysterious and officious the way petty officers of the night staff should appear. 'On the deck you lot. Dress in No. 3s.'

'Me too?' said Sparky still under the blanket.

'You too. Quick!'

'What's up?'

'Nothing as concerns you, Bo Peep. Just get dressed.'

Varne pulled a whitefront over his head and put on the trousers of his No. 3 suit.

'Christ. I wish I knew what was going on,' Sparky now getting up. Varne went across to the door and looked along both sides of the landing and the landing opposite. About a dozen cell doors were open and coming out, the mumble of voices and the sound of men getting dressed.

'What is it, Varney?' The boy dressing very quickly.

'Don't know. There's a heap of bods getting dressed.' Sparky went across in his underpants and took a look out. 'Christ. You believe that?'

'I'd believe anything that happens here,' said Varne. Another of the night staff, a tall, horse-faced, two-badger



leading patrolman came along the landing. 'All right you lot. Get your micks lashed up.' Stopping in the doorway, then going on again, all the while chewing, and leaving the smell of peppermint behind.

There were only two eyebolts in the cell, one in either of the main walls. Varne took the hammock cover from under his mattress, slung it from the eyebolts then took the mattress and put it in the hammock and folded the blanket and filled it along the hollow of the mattress, lashed up, took it down off the eyebolts and wound the clews round the lashing. When he finished, Sparky began slinging his.

'Looks like we're moving out,' Varne said.

Sparky folding his blanket, 'We can't be going anywhere this time of night.'

'Maybe the Prime Minister gave us free pardons,' Varne said.

'It's a bleedin' big maybe.' Sparky finished lashing and the boy started to sling his hammock and not saying anything and looking a little bewildered.

Varne put his kit-bag and hammock outside of the door on the landing. Other sailors were doing the same, and a few stood outside on the landing looking about and talking quietly. A stoker across the landing put his head on one side inquiringly. Varne shrugged his shoulders. The stoker turned away down the landing to see if anyone else knew what was happening. Sparky brought his kit-bag out, and downstairs someone opened the main hall door and a crowd of maybe twenty or thirty sailors came in wearing green gaiters and green webbing belts with black bayonet scabbards hanging from the belts and swinging on their left hips as they walked.

'That's the barrack guard,' said Varne.

'Search me,' said Sparky. 'I'm from *Mercury*. I don't know anything about R.N.B.'

'Where's the kid?' Varne looking in the cell.

The boy came out with his hammock, more bewildered than ever.

'You were in R.N.B.,' said Varne, 'That the guard?'

The boy looked over the rail to the hall. 'Yes. That's them.'

'It's what I thought. We're moving out.'

'Like hell,' Sparky looking over the rail. 'At this time of night?'

'If you can't take a joke you shouldn't have joined.'

'They can't give me a draft. I just come back from the Med four months ago.'

'Write your M.P. about it. That's what they're for. Stopping matelots getting drafts they don't want.'

'Where are we going to get drafted?' the boy asked.

'You see any draft notes in *Victory*?' Varne asked. 'Sometimes they ask for volunteers.'

The boy went on looking down at the Guard. 'I think they wanted some for a frigate in the Persian Gulf.'

'That's out anyway,' said Varne. 'I'm not going to the Gulf. They want me to go the Gulf they'll have to get some bastard carry me.'

'I know three bods who died out there with the heat,' said Sparky.

'If they were oppos of yours they probably died of the clap,' said Varne. And to the boy, 'You heard about any new wars lately? You been on the outside longer than us.'

'There's a war in Korea,' the boy said.

'That isn't a war,' Varne said. 'That's only where they send idiots to starve and sleep in the snow.'

'Jesus. You might die out there,' Sparky looking shocked.

'Take your pick,' said Varne. 'Freeze to death or roast to a cinder.'

'Maybe it's somewhere else,' the boy said.

'Yeah. Maybe I'm going back to America,' said Varne, arms folded across his chest, massive shoulders sloping. 'All those knobhounds in Philly and Norfolk dressed as pushers and waiting to pour hooch down your throat. And all those pushers twitching their arses and saying: "Goddamn Limeys. Goddamn bootiful buck limeys." That's a hell of a more sensible way to die.'

'I'll come with you,' said Sparky more happily now. 'You still got the addresses?'

'Yeah. We'll get medals too. For fighting for America's freedom. We'll fight for the suppressed pushers and knobhounds of America.'

'Right. Can it you lot! Downstairs with your gear,' the patrolman who had the misfortune to resemble a horse said.

The prisoners stood at one side of the hall and the guard across the other. In the middle stood three petty officers and the officer of the day, still smelling very sweet. One of the petty officers, shouted the names of the prisoners. He called McLaren. No one answered.

'McLaren,' the petty officer who shouted the names called, and looking up and around the landings.

'You think I'm bastard deaf?' someone called back from above. The petty officer stared back above, getting red in the face.

They finished calling the names as McLaren came downstairs. He was thick set, about forty, and had grey hair. About twenty medals were on his jumper but no good conduct badges on his sleeve. James Varne had been in this establishment five times, and each time he had met McLaren either coming in or going out. That is how it was with this boy McLaren. He could have got you a bad name.

'You! McLaren,' the petty officer who was red in the face said. 'You first. And I don't ever want to see you again. You understand? I . . . never . . . want . . . to . . . set . . . eyes . . . on . . . you . . . again,' looking quite mad and biting the words.

'Yes, sir,' McLaren said, brushing imaginary dust off his sleeve. Two sailors came out of the ranks of the guard, and the petty officer clipped a pair of handcuffs on McLaren's wrists. The two sailors carried the kit and they went outside with McLaren walking between them.

The fifteen prisoners were split up with the guard in two covered lorries and the baggage following in an open truck. When they swung out of the dockyard gates they saw from the tail of the lorries the lights of the Harbour Station and out on the harbour the lights of the Gosport Ferry and the reflection of the lights along the jetty by the station on the black water, then they were driving down Queen Street, dark houses either side, and Jewish tailor shops, and the bars; and it was very dark on the narrow street, and with no one about on the pavements.

Then through the gates of *Victory*, with the gilt letters of God Save The Queen overhead, faint and metallic-looking in the light of the street lamps; and slowly along the roadway by the railings, and past the office block, and

the sick bay hut, and on to the gate opening on to the rail siding.

The drivers let the tailboards down and the guard and prisoners climbed down on to the tarmac still inside of the gateway. McLaren was last out of the lorry behind Varne, and when he jumped he slipped and landed on his face and got up waving his chained hands together and calling the guard all the useless bastards out. Some McLaren. But no one said anything, except McLaren, who went on cursing and shouting.

Beyond the gateway were the bright lit carriages of a train and sailors sat talking and peering out the windows across the dark to where the prisoners stood. Two petty officers and a tall lieutenant stood by a large cardboard box to one side of the gateway. One of the petty officers held a hurricane lamp while the other shouted names off a paper. One by one the prisoners went forward, accompanied by escorts, and were given bag meals out of the box then went on into the siding onto the train.

A special carriage was reserved for the prisoners. In one compartment sat Varne, Parker, McLaren, and the boy, subdued and not happy with all this and not knowing anything. Out in the corridor escorts stood by the doors, and afterwards the two petty officers and the tall lieutenant coming along counting the prisoners. As they went on along the train some of the guard came aboard carrying bag meals and relieved the escorts by the doors.

A round-faced sailor with red hair got into the compartment and sat by Varne. After what he thought a respectable passage of time he slowly, slowly, slid the door shut with his foot, the prisoners looking at him, and him looking at them, timidly and very self-consciously, him on one side of law and order and being so outnumbered at the same time.

'It's quarter past two,' he said looking studiously at his wrist watch.

'Yeah?' said McLaren never taking his eyes off him.

'Yes. That's right. Quarter past two.'

'What time is it?' McLaren said.

The escort went very red and was having difficulty with his swallowing so that his adam's apple went up and down and up and down, and him looking out the window to the corridor



Afterwards turning back to McLaren, holding out his bag-meal, 'You want this? I'm not hungry.'

'You might if we're going far,' said Varne looking at him with those blue, very blue eyes.

'I'll get breakfast in the morning. I'll get home a little while before we come back down,' the escort said attempting a smile that did not seem much like a smile at all.

'Where you live?' said Varne never taking those eyes off him.

'Liverpool,' he said held by those awful eyes.

'The lousy bastards,' McLaren said. 'What ship's in Liverpool?'

'It's a trooper,' the escort said, looking from one to the other and wishing he had kept his mouth shut in the first place.

'Where's it going?' asked Sparky.

'They don't tell you where you're going when you're shanghaied,' Varne said.

'What do you mean, shanghaied?' the boy asked.

'Like the press gang,' Varne said, 'Only modern.'

'Hey you! Where the hell we going?' Sparky shouted at the escort gone back to staring out the window. 'You hear me?'

'I don't know. Honest to Christ I don't.'

'Maybe the West Indies, eh?' Sparky to Varne.

'No. They come back and pay off then re-commission. It's the Far East. We're the idiots going out to starve and sleep in the snow.' The escort looked about the compartment then stared back out the window. 'I don't know really, but maybe you're right.'

Down the platform was the blowing of a whistle, and the train jerking, and starting slowly out the siding, two or three figures on the platform looking in the windows as they were going past, and the white steam rising like ground mist and sparks coming back out the engine and falling brightly through the steam.

'Wherever it is we're on our way,' McLaren said. 'Yeah.'

'You think it's the Far East?' asked Sparky.

'Don't know, but I'd rather go there than a lot of other places I know. I did a two and a half out there the end of the war. Number One, mate. Trunk yourself stupid and

booze round the clock,' said McLaren looking in the bag meal. 'Hey. A boiled egg, a green apple and a bastard corned-dog sandwich. What they think we are, gash bins?'

'All right if I go on up?' Varne said.

'You're not supposed to, you know,' the escort said.

Varne rising and sliding the door open, 'I'll do it here then.'

'All right,' said the escort. 'I'll take you, but I'm not supposed to.'

When he came out, Varne pushed the door of the next carriage open and went in, the escort behind him. It was one of those through-corridor carriages and down each side sailors sat in fours at the small tables. Mostly they were young ordinary seamen and those nearest the door stopped talking and looked at Varne and the handcuffs and the escort behind.

'Which bucket you lot going to?' said Varne.

'The *Homage*,' said one of the ordinary seamen. 'She's in Hong Kong. We'll be going up the coast. You get medals for going up the coast.' The other ordinary seamen smiled and nodded in accordance, and the able seamen detached, tried to appear as if they knew all about foreign drafts and medals.

Varne closed the door and went back along the corridor, the escort at his back.

'What's the buzz?' said Sparky as they came in the door.

'The *Homage*. Hong Kong.'

'Christ. Two and a half before I see home again.'

'Fancy getting out of detention to go to Hong Kong,' said the boy grinning. And when they looked at him, 'Well, it's better than back there, isn't it?'

No one answered at first, then McLaren smiled, 'Seems to suit us all right. Wait till you see those slant-eyed pushers cocking their bare arses at you and you shacking-up all-nighters for three bucks. Christ.'

'Three bucks,' said the boy, 'what's the value?'

'About three and ninepence,' said McLaren sat back smiling broadly.

'You hear that?' said the boy. 'You can get it for three and ninepence.'

'Hey, we're here. Liverpool, matey,' said Sparky nudging Varne awake. The train had stopped. It was in a siding in a large wharfside shed. The two regulating petty officers came back along the platform making signs for everyone to get off. A party of sailors came back down the train and unloaded the prisoners' baggage. The prisoners stood back out on the platform with the escorts watching the unloading. Varne tried easing the handcuffs on his wrists, and yawning and feeling much like hell, and the rest of the sailors stood up the platform apart from the prisoners and looking at them as maybe they would look at bank-robbers.

When the train had backed out, the prisoners were marched further along the shed. Around the shed were stacked wooden crates, and further along sacks piled almost to the roof. Two women pushed a tea-trolley in through a door from the street. Some of the sailors seeing the trolley coming cheered and behaved like maybe schoolboys on a picnic, but the two women pushed the trolley on past them and across to where a group of petty officers stood passing the time of day. One of the women opened a door of the trolley and took out cups and filled them from the large urn then handed them, smiling, to the petty officers. Afterwards the petty officers went back to passing a little more of the time of day and the woman who poured the tea got her knitting from inside the trolley and began knitting and talking to the other woman and both paying no attention to anything in particular.

'What's going on then?' Sparky indignant.

'They're talking,' said Varne.

'I know they're talking. What about?'

'About the terrible price of this steak mince in Liverpool,' said Varne.

The sailors stood a little while longer patiently waiting for any tea that might be coming their way. Then Varne grew tired of waiting and looked at the escort. The escort nodded. Seems he was wondering what had happened to his tea too. So Varne went across to the woman who was knitting and

who was worried about the price of this steak mince and said to the good woman:

'What about our tea?'

'Tea?' said the good woman. 'What tea?'

'Our tea,' said Varne.

'Your tea?'

'Yeah. Like the petty officers,' said Varne, 'or maybe you're class-conscious?'

'What is class-conscious?' said the good woman still knitting.

'Never mind. What about our tea?'

'There's only fourteen cups.'

Varne counted the petty officers. There were fourteen of them too.

'Look,' said the other woman opening the door of the trolley to assure him there were no more cups inside.

'Okay,' said Varne.

'I should say so too,' said the woman powdering her nose.

'Yes,' said the other good woman never stopping the needles.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Along here are stood two hundred low sailors who at this moment do not fully realize just how low sailors they really are, and not, of course, including the low prisoners and the fourteen petty officers who ceased to be low sailors the moment they were promoted in the social register. Yes, sir. Which is precisely why they're drinking tea. Yes, sir. And if Jesus doesn't come along shortly and do his loaves and fishes act all over again there's little chance of any other poor bastard having tea. It's just the way the Imperial Navy does things. If there had been cups for each and every low sailor, there wouldn't have been any tea. It's as simple as that. Yes, sir. Nor could you blame the two good women. They were not really class-conscious at all, they were just impressed with all the brass buttons and the finer cloth of the uniforms. Yes, sir. They just made the mistake of thinking the petty officers were more important. And who says: No, sir? After all, it is always men with brass buttons and fine uniforms who win wars for low sailors, and who keep the good women at home free from invaders, and make them happy to have the honour of pouring tea for other men with brass buttons and



fine uniforms going out to win more wars for low sailors and good women at home beleaguered with the rising cost of this steak mince in Liverpool. Yes, sir.

When the petty officers finished their tea they formed everyone up in three ranks, the free sailors out front carrying hammocks and cases, and the prisoners chained up in rear, and stevedores going past with everyone's kit-bags, and the prisoners' hammocks and cases on trolleys. Suddenly a reverent hush fell upon those assembled in the shed as a captain, very smart in his carefully pressed uniform with glittering golden rings and brilliantly coloured ribbons, came sauntering along the shed twirling a black silver-topped cane.

'Draft! Draft, shunnn!' yelled the coxswain and saluted this very grand captain.

All came smartly to attention. The captain stopped, put his monocle to his right eye and looked upon the sailors. Then this brave and upstanding captain coughed gently, and flicked a speck of dust from his brilliantly coloured ribbons with his white gloves, then said: 'Men. Men, I am your Captain. Captain Antony Galahad Huntington-Perifield. Men. Men, you shall be boarding a troopship in a little while, which is to take us to our new ship, Her Gracious Majesty's man o' war, *Homage*. Aboard this troopship, which is under discipline of Her Gracious Majesty's Imperial Army, you will at all times accord your behaviour to that of men honoured to wear the proud uniform of Her Majesty Our Gracious Queen. When you pass through this building you will see the troopship, her decks lined by many men of the other services. Also will there be on the private decks, many gentlemen officers and their ladies viewing the embarkation with critical eye. I have already been living aboard this ship two days and many of these gentlemen officers and their ladies are friends of mine. Needless to say, when boarding this ship you will convey by your upright bearing how proud and honoured you are to be on your way to the Far East Theatre. That is all, men.'

'Three cheers for our good captain,' yelled the coxswain throwing his cap in the air.

The three resounding cheers of the proud and honoured sailors swept the quayside and shook the shed to its foundations.

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'The Far East Theatre.'

'Yeah,' said Sparky. 'With this performance it's standing room only.'

'And another three cheers for the Prince of Golder's Green,' said Varne to no one in particular.

Then the Prince of Golder's Green took the monocle from his eye and turned and sauntered elegantly up the shed, twirling his black silver-topped cane and conveying by his upright bearing how proud he was of his glittering golden rings and brilliantly coloured ribbons. The free sailors out front stood rigidly at attention, hammocks and cases firmly in their grasp, sweating profusely and talking inwardly to themselves and no longer behaving like maybe schoolboys on a picnic.

No, sir. James Varne thought. No matter how you try you can't possibly think you're going to like Hong Kong—even if the pushers are only three bucks for all-nighters. No, sir.

After they had stood at attention a little longer, and long enough to the satisfaction of the coxswain, he stood them at ease, then went across and stood before the prisoners, the greatness of his authority sitting on his back like a hump. To further complicate matters the coxswain was knock-kneed too, and had a very large and round head, and the cap he wore coincided with the shape of his head, so that from the back he looked a walking edition of one of those golfing umbrellas at Sunningdale.

'You prisoners will mix with the others,' said the coxswain. 'And when you go aboard you'll walk with your hands in the flap of your trousers. Understand? The escorts only come as far as the end of the shed. Captain's orders.'

Someone down the end of the shed blew a whistle and the sailors came smartly to attention, turned right, and marched out onto the quayside, their upright bearing conveying to the whole world their pride to be going to the Far East Theatre where they would starve and sleep in the snow, but where they could buy a woman for only three bucks; and for the sake of their good captain's gentleman and lady friends they marched up the gangway, proud and bold, like the warriors of ancient Rome, and the prisoners with chained hands hidden in the flaps of their trousers.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. And if any of you dear

ladies on the private decks take a closer look at some of us low sailors embarking you might well shudder at the thought of this outrageous indecency we appear to commit. But then, maybe gentlemen's ladies are not aware of such things, and maybe, no such thoughts enter their virgin minds. Yes, sir . . . I mean, no, sir.

At the top of the gangway the prisoners were pulled out from the free sailors and manhandled through many decks to the cells below the waterline. There were only two cells and the prisoners were clamped seven in one and eight in the other, and outside in the alleyway the petty officers sat at a long wooden table drinking tea and talking of the women they had met in different ports of the world and of the illustrious feats performed by these women; and all this while they waited someone higher placed in the social register to decide what had better be done with the prisoners.

However, that someone had something more important to do than decide what should be done with a mere handful of scurvy prisoners, and so they remained in the cells all afternoon listening to the petty officers tell of their conquests and comparing them to their own, while the ship left the quayside and went down the Mersey; and all presumably because the good captain knew how prisoners' minds worked, and he did not wish them leaping off the troop decks into the harbour in an attempt to escape going to the Far East Theatre. That was not a spectacle for gentlemen's ladies with virgin minds to witness. By Timothy, no, sir.

Then when they were at sea and it getting near to supper-time and the Prince of Golder's Green thought it most unlikely that no matter how low a low sailor might be, he would certainly not be low enough to jump in the sea to drown on an empty belly; so the Prince sent his first lieutenant down to let the prisoners out. Of course, the Prince was right, however low a sailor might be, he will think twice about drowning, be it on an empty belly or not.

'All right. All right,' bellowed the first lieutenant as he came in the door. 'All right, I say. Let the bounders out. Let them out, I say. And trouble from anyone after this and I'll have the sot keel-hauled. You hear?'

The first lieutenant was a tall man with a stoop to his narrow shoulders and had a very red face. His cap, padded in fashion of a Grand Admiral of the German Fleet, was tilted over one eye. Also the first lieutenant was an extremely ambitious man. He had studied the writings of Monsarrat for nine years in an effort to mould himself as a model first lieutenant of Her Gracious Majesty's Imperial Navy. Alas, unknown to him it was all in vain, for the low sailors decided he was a case of arrested development and named him Blue Tot the Pirate.

In the mess-deck it was suppertime. Supper was beans on fried bread, and cold tea with bread spread with Australian margarine. The sailors were very grateful to Australia.

And afterward when they had suppered:

'You going up topside?' asked Sparky.

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'Might as well. Could do with a drop of fresh air.'

Up top the clean cold wind blew off the sea and far below the water rushing black along the ship's side. It was almost dark, but far to port still showed the black wedge of the Welsh coast, long and humped against the fast darkening sky.

'We'll be in the Bay tomorrow,' Sparky said leaning over the rail staring at the black water.

'Yeah. Maybe we'll be lucky and catch a drop of roughers.'

'This bucket'll be a bleedin' shambles if we do.'

'Yeah, but we might get more to eat,' said Varne. 'Those pongoes and Air Force bods'll be lining the rails heaving their rings up.'

'I've seen better scran on a gash barge than we're getting on here,' said Sparky still staring at the black water.

'Watch it. Big Brother might be listening.'

'What you think about this new skipper?'

'A pig's bastard,' said Varne looking at distant Wales and wishing he was up there on one of the hills walking down again.

'Two pigs' bastards,' said Sparky.

'Let's have a look around. Maybe we'll meet a couple of W.R.A.C. pushers bound for Bombay or some place.'

'The Army doesn't send it's pushers by trooper.'

'No?' said Varne.

'No. They'd be bleedin' grannies before they got there.'

They walked around on the fo'c'sle, then down aft to the well-deck.

'This is a fair sized old bucket,' said Sparky looking at the upper-deck work. 'What's that top deck?'

Varne looked up at the top deck with its strings of lights over the open alleyway and the lights shining brightly on the white glossed paint.

'That,' said Varne, 'that's for admirals and generals and air marshals and their dear ladies. It's got it's own lounge and dining-room and boozier. That next deck's for gentlemen officers and their ladies. It's got it's own lounge and dining-room and boozier as well. They probably got the ballroom up there too. That next lot of cabins inside the well-deck alleyways are for N.C.O.s. They got stewards to fetch their booze.'

'That right?'

'Of course it's right. I've been on troopers before. They're all the same.'

'So that's how we sleep next the bilges?'

'That's right. The same reason you got no tea. The world's class-conscious.'

'What about our boozier?'

'We haven't got one,' said Varne going through his pockets for cigarette ends. 'We're inferior. We're right the bottom the ladder.'

'I never thought about that,' said Sparky looking at Varne.

'Don't. You might want to jump over the side.'

Sparky pointing up at the poop-deck astern: 'Who the hell sleeps up there?'

'Niggers. The niggers sleep up there. They sleep there because they're not fit to sleep anywhere else. You can't have niggers about where they can frighten gentlemen's ladies and their sprogs. Niggers got to know they're niggers.'

'No kidding?'

'No kidding. We're pretty low, but niggers are even lower than us. Just shows how low you can get.'

The sky was black and the water black, and out there everything black and nothing moving and no lights, no noise, except the rushing of water along the hull and below deck the workings of machinery.

'What you see?' said Sparky looking at Varne staring out into the blackness.

'I see lots of things,' Varne said still out there in the blackness.

Sparky peering out from the rail: 'Well I can't see a bleedin' thing, mate.'

'You don't look hard enough.'

'Aaawh, stuff it. I'm going down get a couple of bed spaces.'

Afterward, it was very quiet and the only movement the ship steaming through the black water, and the overhead lights of a fishing boat coming fast down the port side, very close, and the deck-lights on and two figures in yellow oil-skin frock-coats staring up at the troopship decks.

'Varne?' spoke a voice, quiet and close, and not quite sure. Varne turned around looking down at a petty officer. The dark tight-curling hair had gone more grey since last time, though he still wore the one thin gold ear-ring in the lobe of his left ear.

'Well, well, Walters,' said Varne, 'I thought you'd be a chief by now.'

'Maybe they found out,' said Walters smiling, and his face still handsome with it.

Must be over forty now, thought Varne. Funny thing about these fellows, they always seem to look younger than the others.

'... But what you doing aboard here? This is the last place I ever expected to meet the notorious Jimmy Varne.'

'Shanghaied,' said Varne.

'Isn't that wonderful? They only take the best fighting men.'

'I only fight for myself.'

'And we'll fight for you,' Walters smiling.

Varne smiling: 'Yeah.'

'It's not to be laughed at. I'm surprised at you, Jimmy.'

'You want I should cry?'

'Don't cry, my boy. You'd break a thousand hearts. Even only knowing you . . . you know? The others are poor compensation. I'd have given all up for you. The boys of Amsterdam. The boys of Naples. The boys of. . . All those boys.'

'And what's so bad about those pushers in the shop windows in Copenhagen? Or those wrestling in the clubs in Hamburg? Or those pushers in Stockholm shaking their breasts out the windows? And the pushers at home . . . very romantic.'

'You haven't seen my steward,' said Walters, the still handsome face lit by the wide smile and the white teeth so white in the glow of the overhead lights.

'You haven't seen our bilge rats,' Varne, arms folded, standing so easy, and the wide long shoulder muscles huge and tightly defined under the jumper.

'Forget about it. Want a drink? I have a bottle.'

'Is it allowed?'

'Come on. What are rules for?'

They went along the port passage, white and fresh, smelling of that clean shipboard closeness, and into an outboard cabin. It was small. Two bunks, one above the other, stood against the passage bulkhead; and a single bunk against the for'ard bulkhead. The rest, a white enamelled dresser, a brilliant green rug on the deck, and a stainless sink under the scuttle. Outside of the scuttle was black water and black sky, and all the way out there blackness, and the rushing of the water on the hull close-sounding. Walters brought a bottle of Long John out a drawer of the dresser.

'Here we are,' he said taking two glasses off the back of the dresser and filling them, 'Let's drink to the *Homage*. May she sink before we get there.'

They drank, Varne looking around the cabin.

'Never saw you on the quayside.' Varne finally, and feeling the whisky going down.

'I know. I've been here two days. Came up with the captain.'

'I don't think I'm going to go a bundle on this *Homage*. Seems to be too many death and glory boys aboard.'

'You're probably right. And I don't go much on the captain. He's already gone and made me captain of the quarter-deck. Bitchy . . . that's what.' And after a pause to drink, changing the subject. 'It's three years. How's it all been? Seen America again?'

'No. No, have you?' said Varne sat on the single bunk.

'No such luck. All those gay old queens in drag too . . . squeezing each other's rubber breasts and chewing ears. Mad about matelots. Mad. You know, one of them got me two American boys? Most disappointing . . . still, maybe it was because there were so many watching. And those bitches. Dipping their breasts in highballs and writing on the walls with their nipples: I LOVE LIMEYS'.

'Yeah. And afterwards.'

'A little more than three years ago. Time flies all right. How old are you now, Jimmy?'

'Twenty-four,' said Varne, then finishing the drink.

'That's good. One should be twenty-four always. You been home lately?'

'None to go to. Just Aggie's or the Traf.'

'But before . . . you must have been somewhere.'

'Before the Navy was the Catholic Children's Protectory.'

'I never knew you were a Catholic, Jimmy.'

'I'm not. Not any more. Never prayed since I broke my rosary. One of the nuns. She used to take us for walks. A whole gang of us. One night it was raining and she took me alone. I didn't know what she meant when we got there. Stood that way and all so thin and white under that black habit. All I had was my rosary. Said she'd like that. Never had it that way. I broke the chain and lost all the beads. She was very nice about it. Got me another next morning. But I never prayed again. Always think about those beads lying out there under the leaves under the trees in the rain.'

'Well, everybody's different.'



'I didn't know that then. Anyway you don't think that about nuns.'

'But you learn to live with it though.'

'I never carried a rosary afterward.'

Someone knocked on the door, and it opened, and a white-coated steward came in, tall and blond and very anaemic-looking.

'A friend of mine,' said Walters with a languid wave towards Varne. 'The fightingist man in the Imperial Navy.'

'Wonderful. Butch to the core,' the steward said looking at Varne.

'Very,' Walters said. 'But not interested. I feel like crying.'

'Oh, I couldn't blame you. I couldn't. Really I couldn't,' said the steward, and sat by Walters on the bottom of the double bunk. Walters got up and filled the glasses and brought one for the steward.

'Here's to our future,' Walters said.

'Yes, to the future. His future,' the steward said gesturing with his glass to Varne.

'To all low sailors,' Varne said.

They drank, and afterwards Walters filled the glasses again. And to the steward: 'You know, Jimmy's just told me a very funny story about a rosary. She'd never had it with a rosary before. She was a nun too.'

'Really? Isn't that strange? You're not going to believe me but this is perfectly true. My mother used to buy ever so many packets of that long Italian spaghetti. I always wondered what she did with it because we never ate it. Then one night I got up to the loo I found out. She used it on the lodger. He was the strong man in a travelling circus.'

Varne finished his drink and stood up.

'You're not going?' said Walters.

'Yeah. I got to get a bed-space.' And turning to go, 'Thanks for the drink.'

'Wait. You have any cigarettes?'

'You got nothing when you're shanghaied.'

Walters opened a drawer of the dresser and brought out two packets of cigarettes.

'Here,' he said. 'They're all I have left.'

'No thanks,' said Varne, 'I can get along without.'

'No, no. You take them. At least we can practice Christianity if nothing else.' He put the cigarettes inside the front of Varne's jumper.

'All right,' said Varne. 'Thanks. Thank you. Good night.'

'Good night,' they said.

Varne shut the door and went back along the passage onto the well-deck. Outboard it was very dark. A wind had come up. He stood listening to the rushing of the black water and to the wind in the aerals overhead. It was late, and no one about on deck, and the only sound the sound of working machinery and the water and the wind, and the wind whipping his jumper collar over his head and bringing snatches of music and laughter from the ballroom.

Two days out from Port Said the troops were given permission to sleep on the fo'c'sle at night. It was not a very large fo'c'sle and there were many troops, so that by late afternoon the men were already lying down in order they might be certain of a place to sleep. They had no beds, each spread his blanket on the wooden planking and lay watching the stewards up on the private upper-cabin decks set out camp beds. Later in the evening, on the for'ard and after ends of the private decks, screens were lowered so as the troops might not see their gentlemen officers and their ladies and families going to bed.

When the troops were sufficiently exhausted they fell asleep, only to get up and run below when during the night it rained. Meanwhile the screens would be hurriedly raised on the private decks so the gentlemen officers and their ladies and families might enjoy the spectacle of troops running from the rain. If it did not rain, in the morning the niggers turned the hoses on them when they started scrubbing the decks.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. It's very funny. Black men

under the orders of our white gentlemen officers washing us low white men off the decks. Yes, sir. Very funny. Rule Britannia. Three monkeys up a stick.

After the porridge they had for breakfast, the troops went to boat-stations, where the gentlemen officers of the Imperial Army inspected the sailors of the Imperial Navy to see they wore their life-jackets in the regulation manner, and that the straps were tied with the regulation knots, and instructed them in the regulations of lowering a life-boat.

Afterward the soldiers paraded in their hobnail boots on the wooden decks, and did rifle drill, and physical exercise, and rifle practice over the stern from the poop-deck while the niggers kneeled on prayer mats accompanying the shooting with their wailing, then they did Bren-gun assembly and map-reading, and were instructed how they were going to win the Korean War.

When the Imperial Army had as nearly as possible won the war, the Imperial Air Force decided they would win the same war in a far better and more complete manner than the soldiers who smelled of sweat and stinking feet; and so they started the whole procedure all over again.

Then the captain of the *Homage*, being the good captain he was, and knowing full well that his ship was going to win the Korean War or any other war that was going, decided that the Imperial Navy was going to begin all over again and show these unfortunate soldiers and Air Force men that they were, after all, just so much cannon fodder. Then when they had won the war twice as fast and in a more complete manner than anyone else could possibly hope to, they went below to a dinner of bean soup and semolina. After dinner they went back up on deck and won another war just to keep their hand in.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Never were there so many Korean Wars fought and won so many times a day so far from Korea. No, sir.

At Port Said the ship took on board cabbages so the troops might not get scurvy, and fresh fruit for the gentlemen officers and their ladies and families so they might not always have to eat their fruit out of tins. The ship lay at anchor at the mouth of the canal all the forenoon watch.

No one was allowed ashore. The captain of the troopship did not want his cargo slaughtered by Arabs when they were already promised to the Communists the other side of the world.

Early on the Arabs came out in their bum-boats, armed with long boat-hooks, and gathered under the well-deck. On the bum-boats the Arabs had their trading names painted—Jock McIntyre, Jock McDougall, Jock Lindsay. For some unknown reason they appeared very romantically-minded about Scotland and all spoke pidgin English with a broad Scots accent.

Below the well-deck they stood in their boats and pointed at their goods laid carefully out for all to see.

‘Fruit! You wint fruit, Jock?’

‘Fish! Fried fish! Nae chips, Jock. Sorry! Nasser nae eat chips.’

‘Handbag, Jock? Look! Camels, date palms, pyramids. Very pretty. Twinty-five bob, Jock. You give girl-friend. Give you jig jig. Good, eh, Jock?’

‘Onybody wint fruit? Headscarf got dirty pictures? Knickers got dirty pictures? Look!’ The Arab held a pair to himself. He was very thin and dark, and the knickers very large and white and with reproductions of postcards all over.

‘Ornaments for home. Very good. Look! Squeeze girl’s head. Look! Opens legs. Very good. Look! Squeeze boy’s head. Look! Stands. Very good, Jock. You buy?’

‘Dirty postcards, Jock? Girls with girls. Boys with boys. Look! Very dirty. One bob each.’

The gentlemen officers and their ladies watched from the private decks, smiling condescendingly at the troops and Arabs.

‘Look! Look, lady! Fruit. Very good fruit. Six oranges. One bob.’

The gentleman’s lady was about forty, and wore a yellow dress, and had large breasts which swelled over the neck of the dress as she leaned on the handrail. Her face was burned red by the sun and she smiled at all the troops who followed the Arab’s conversation.

‘You buy, eh, lady?’

The gentleman officer at her side nodded. The Arab put

the oranges in a string bag hung on the end of the boat-hook and swung it up to the private deck. The gentleman officer had to lean down before he got the bag, then he held it up and he and his lady looked at the oranges. Then, looking down at the Arab and shaking his head, 'Oranges no good. You hear? Your damn oranges are not fit to eat. Stinking Arabs selling stinking fruit ought to be shot.'

'No! No, Jock. Very good fruit. Look!' The Arab picked up an orange and threw it up at the well-deck.

Varne caught it, looked at it, and shouted to the Arab: 'Yes, Jock. Good oranges. The best bastard oranges I seen.'

'See, lady?' shouted the Arab. 'Sailor Jock know best. Good oranges. One bob, please.'

'You filthy thieving wog!' shouted the gentleman officer, and dropped the bag of oranges into the water.

'No! No! One bob, please,' shouted the Arab.

'I hief!' shouted the gentleman.

'Bastard! Bastard!' shouted the Arab.

Then a rush of bare feet onto the well-deck and the bos'n yelling at the niggers to rig the hoses. Immediately the Arabs pushed off with their boat-hooks from the hull.

'Turn the hoses on them! Turn the hoses on them!' yelled the gentlemen and ladies on the private decks.

The Arabs dropped their boat-hooks and sculled as fast as possible.

'Turn the hoses on the filthy wogs!'

The Arab whose oranges had been dropped in the water stopped sculling, picked up a banana, put it between his legs, and shook his fist at the private decks: 'You, Jock! You, Jock! Sit on this, Jock!'

'Turn the hoses on the filthy wogs!' shouted those on the private decks.

'Fat lady not eat oranges!' shouted the Arab. 'Fat lady eat this.'

The niggers turned the hoses on the Arab. He almost went over the side of his boat with the force of the water. Most of his goods were swept away. He stopped shouting and got down on his hands and knees and grabbed for his hand-bags, and fruit, and knickers, and fried fish, and dirty post-cards of girls and girls and boys and boys.

When the niggers turned off the hoses, the Arab went on grabbing till he had got back what goods had not sank, then sculled out of range of the hoses to the other Arabs, where they gathered up bananas and called for the gentleman officer's lady to do with them what they thought most fitting.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. And the very best of British luck. Yes, sir.

Afterward, when dinner had been served, the ship entered the canal. It steamed so slowly there was practically no wash at all. Nothing could be seen from the fo'c'sle except the brown sandy banks, and sometimes, the broad, drooping, green fronds of date palms. There was no breeze, but the fine sand hung in the hot air and stung your eyes and dried your nostrils and gritted between your teeth. It was very hot, and the sky very blue and the heat beating off the white-scrubbed decks.

Ahead on the right bank was an Arab encampment, around it many date palms, and under the date palms were tied camels. The Arabs paid no attention as the ship drew near, and went on sitting round their fire. The ship took on a list to starboard as many of the people went around to see the Arabs, and their tents, and their camels stood quietly under the date palms eating. Up on the private decks the gentlemen officers and their ladies held cameras ready.

As the ship drew abreast, these great brown-bodied men got slowly to their feet, strung out along the bank, and raised their robes exposing themselves and making obscene gestures to the ladies on the private decks, and shouting. 'British! Shit! Shit! Our canal. Go home. British! Shit! Shit!'

All afternoon the ship passed along the canal, and on the

banks, Arab encampments, and the Arabs behaving the same; and all afternoon the gentlemen officers' ladies went on taking pictures of the splendid Arab landscapes, and the camels, and the date palms.

Before the ship entered Columbo the sailors were each given an advance of one pound from their good captain, on condition they would not get drunk. Being good sailors and respecting their captain's advice, they solemnly swore they would not even look at strong drink. Then, as they were about to go ashore they were informed by their first lieutenant, Blue Tot the Pirate, that should they wish to enjoy an afternoon tea in the fine Olde English tradition, they should visit a certain Christian establishment catering for the fine sailors of Merrie England. Being the fine sailors they were and respecting their first lieutenant's advice, they solemnly swore they would call at the Christian establishment for Olde English tea like all other fine sailors of Merrie England.

When the gangway went down they went ashore in the liberty boats, all the fine sailors sitting easy in the swaying boats; the sailors dressed very smart in white duck-cloth trousers and whitefronts, and the gentlemen officers and their ladies taking pictures from the private decks of Merrie England's fine sailors.

James Varne was ashore with Sparky and McLaren. And when they stepped ashore: 'Of course, we're going to tea,' Varne said, standing on the jetty very tall and wide, and blond in the sunlight.

'Yeah, of course. Nothing like tea and buns,' Sparky said.

'Yeah,' McLaren said screwing his eyes against the sun and peering up and down the landing stage, 'They know what they can do with their bastard buns.'

'And they will too,' said Sparky lighting a Woodbine.

When they reached the roadway adjoining the landing stage, Merrie England's fine sailors inquired of the local guides which of the many sights to visit that would make Columbo something to remember. The guide Varne chose was seated on the roadway on a trishaw. The native was a learned gentleman who had been a guide for many years and was noted for knowing all places of historical importance.

'Hello, John. Girl? Jig jig?' said the learned gentleman.

'What's she like?' said Varne.

'Very good. Very good. Young girl. Clean girl.'

'How young?' asked Sparky.

'Fourteen.'

'Nothing younger?' asked McLaren.

'Yes, yes. But more money.'

'How much?'

'Ten rupees.'

'Ten rupees for three?' Sparky asked.

'No, no, no. Each.'

'Too much,' said Varne.

'You like sec exhibish then?'

'What sort?' asked Varne.

'Two girls.'

'Seen it.'

'Three girls.'

'Seen that too,' said Varne, 'tell you what, we'll think about it over a beer. You know any good bars?'

'Yeah,' said Sparky. 'The most dirty, stinking, flea-ridden bar in Columbo.'

'I know place. Very good bar. Very good bar.'

The three sailors climbed aboard the trishaw.

'How much?' Varne suddenly.

'Five rupees.'

'Two rupees,' said Varne.

'Four rupees.'

'Two rupees.' Varne adamant.

'No, no. Four rupees.'

The three sailors climbed back out the trishaw.

'How much?' asked Varne.

'Four rupees.'



The three fine sailors threw Columbo's foremost historical guide in the harbour, and turned and walked up into the city.

Columbo is a very beautiful city. It stands overlooking the blue ocean and smells like a sewerage works. It is very hot, and the streets very dirty, and the pavements crowded with open canvas tents called restaurants which sell tea in dirty glasses, and deformed beggars, and pimps, and little boys, and girls wearing veils over their faces and who open their dresses and shake their breasts at all fine sailors.

It is not known what sights ordinary tourists see in Columbo, but Merrie England's fine sailors are the world's most experienced travellers, and they miss nothing of importance.

They stopped to listen to the sound of music coming out of the door of a building on the corner of a street leading up into the city.

'It's a bar,' Sparky said.

'Yeah,' Varne said. 'Is it low enough?'

A girl came out to the doorway and smiled at them.

'It might be,' McLaren said.

'You come, John? Plenty drinks,' said the girl and opened her dress and shook her breasts.

'Yeah, it's low enough,' said Varne.

It was a big square room with a counter along one side, and tables set about the floor, and a raised stage at one end on which sat three musicians. The plaster walls had blackened and the plaster broken in places to show the laths. A fat, bald man wearing a red shirt and white trousers smiled at them and came across to meet them as they went up to the counter. The bar was very crowded. Sat at the tables were many fine sailors and Foreign Legionnaires from a troopship on the way to Viet Nam.

'Welcome, English Johnnies,' said the fat man, 'English sailors know good bar. First drink on the house. After, very cheap.'

The barman put a bottle on the counter along with glasses. The label on the bottle said: Mulrooney's Scotch Whisky—Gladgow. The fat man did not drink with them. After the first mouthful they were not surprised. His barman was the most honest barman in all Columbo.

'You know?' said the fat man, 'I am so happy. Fine English sailors and good Nazi soldiers in French Legion make much business. I give big surprise. I give free floorshow. The best, most skilled folk artistes in Columbo. You like?'

'Yeah. Great stuff,' said McLaren.

The three sailors bought a bottle of excellent Gladgow whisky and sat at one of the tables. Many girls were at the tables. They had only been drinking a little while when a girl came and sat beside them. She smiled. She had a magnificent smile. When she smiled that smile it did things for her and every one else. Her teeth were yellow and her mouth bloodied with betel nut.

'You like bar?' she asked.

'It's all right,' Varne said not looking her way.

She smiled that smile and opened the front of her dress. Underneath she was scrawny and her breasts flabby and hanging on her wrinkled stomach.

'Go away,' Varne said, 'go away.' Making gestures with his hand as he spoke.

'Yeah. Piss off, wizened paps,' McLaren said.

The girl rose with great dignity and stood looking down at them, and them each in turn.

'English sailor no good,' she said. 'Pox!'

'And crabs to you,' Sparky said.

The girl spat betel nut on the floor and walked away between the tables, her dress open and her breasts swinging on her wrinkled stomach; and her walking with great dignity.

The music stopped and the fat man got up on the stage.

'Attention, please! English sailor and German soldier. Attention! Today I give free floorshow. I most happy. I have best Columbo artistes and will——'

'Bring on the belly jerkers,' someone yelled.

The fat man smiled and waved his hands. 'I speak no more. Okay?'

'Yeah. Sit down you fat bastard,' someone yelled.

The floorshow lasted two hours. It was a very good floorshow. The three sailors had never seen one better. Really it was quite a spectacular floorshow. There were nine girls. Two donkeys. Six boys. Fifteen empty whisky bottles. And one large Alsatian dog. They were the most skilled folk

artistes in all Columbo. Really one has to believe that. Most skilled and most original.

The troopship was held up two hours over sailing time till the Shore Patrols found the bar on the corner between the bakery shop and the abortionist's house. And when they had no time left to drink, the fine sailors filled their cigarette lighters with the whisky left and were then thrown out. Altogether, Columbo can be heartily recommended to all tourists, and in particular, that little bar on the corner of the street leading up into the city. Yes, sir, James Varne thought. Yes, sir.

To starboard was the tall white-painted rocks of Tathong Point with its navigation light. Through the mist, waves broke on the rocks, and the sea grey and choppy inshore. The troopship steamed on past into Tathong Channel, and on into Lei Yue Mun Channel leading into Hong Kong Harbour. It very early in the morning, a little after four o'clock. Daylight just beginning to come in, the early morning mist not yet begun to clear, and the raw air damp with the mist. Visibility was poor in the channel, and you heard the muffled ring of the bells on the buoys long before you saw them from the fo'c'sle, close into port, rolling and turning slightly in the low ground swell, then dipping and bucking and the bells clanging loudly as the wash caught them, sending them round in wide swinging arcs

Suddenly the mist lifting to mast-height, thinning, and to port, round sweeping hills, dark green in the early light, and the smooth slabs of brown rock at the foot of the hills, damp and cold-looking, standing out of the flat grey water. To starboard the hills lunging suddenly away to form a bay, where on shore stood the cranes and buildings of a civil dockyard, and off shore a pontoon cradling an old black coaster flying the Red Ensign. Then to port the hills abruptly

dropping back, and Victoria City in view, grey and shapeless, straggling the lower slopes of the high hills beyond. Off shore along the waterfront the brown junks, almost stationary, straw mat sails hanging limp, and the crews stood about the decks dressed in black sharkskin work-suits. Everywhere the black oily water covered with debris and a stench rising off it akin to urine.

'There she is,' McLaren said. 'The land of Oriental mystery, syph and sweaty socks.'

'I'm not looking forward to two and a half years in this bastard place,' said Varne spitting over the side.

'It's not bad,' McLaren said. 'It's all right ashore.' And turning to starboard, 'See over there? That's Kowloon. Behind that it's Commie China. All pongo and Air Force camps over there.'

'What's that?' said Sparky pointing ashore at Victoria City. 'That big yellow building down on the front.'

'That's Wanchai Police Station,' McLaren said proudly. 'And see up there at the end? On those low hills. That's the Shacks. You get all-nighters up there for a couple bucks. All the refugees from the Commies live up there. Sometimes you can even get it for fifty cents. And that big white building up there? That's the China Fleet Club. We piss-up there. Dead cheap. The Wanch starts there and goes on down to the Shacks. You think of it, and you'll find it there.'

The troopship tied up at No. 2 jetty on the Kowloon side. Along the front a little way was the Kowloon-Hong Kong Ferry jetty. It was after dinner when the Imperial Navy draft went ashore. Once ashore they were taken across to Hong Kong about thirty at a time on an old M.F.V. The round trip took about thirty minutes. Varne was in the third party. They sat waiting and smoking on their kit-bags for the M.F.V. to come back. A magnificent white launch, brass fittings gleaming in the sunlight, put in at the steps of the jetty. The captain came down to the head of the steps and stood looking about the harbour. Two of the Chinese crew on the launch came ashore, very smart in their white starched uniforms and carried the captain's pig-skin suit-cases aboard. Afterwards the captain walked aboard swinging his cane and having the Chinese crew leap smartly to attention to salute him. Aboard the troopship the gentlemen

officers still aboard leaned on the handrails of the private decks and smiled and nodded among themselves, appreciating the good captain's importance.

'Sit to attention! Sit to attention on your kit-bags!' yelled Blue Tot the Pirate striding among the sailors. 'Put those cigarettes out! Any man smoking until told to do so is on captain's report.'

'I don't go much on this bastard,' Varne said.

'Me neither,' said Sparky. 'This place stinks to hell as well. If I found out who put our names on this bastard draft I'd get you to break his neck.'

'I'd do it free too,' said Varne his eyes half shut against the hard sunlight.

'Yeah. Yeah,' Sparky dismissing all thought of being on such a draft and now watching intently some of the gentlemen officers' ladies disembarking from the troopship. 'Snooty bastards.'

On the way across the harbour they saw the *Homage* lying in *Tamar* basin. She was a Battle Class destroyer built in 1944. Varne had been on two other ships of the same class back in the Home Fleet. On the *Homage* they had taken 'X' gun off and put up anti-submarine Squid throwers. She was painted tropical grey, almost blue, and with a large black '9' painted on her raked funnel.

They came up astern. One of the Chinese crew threw a mooring rope out to an A.B. already aboard. He put it on a deck cleat and the M.F.V. made fast to the quarter-deck. It was very hot in the sun. By the time the sailors transferred their baggage to the quarter-deck they sweated and cursed and wished they had not set eyes on the *Homage*.

Yes, sir, James Varne thought. Roll on my Doz. Yes, sir.

The second day aboard, Able Seaman James Varne took the afternoon watch as quartermaster. Ordinary Seaman Worrall

was the bos'n's mate. The officer of the day was Flag-Lieutenant Wainwright.

- 1201. The captain buzzed. Wanted his steward. Captain told the bos'n's mate he did not wear his cap according to regulations and ordered him to go below and clean his shoes.
- 1202. The wardroom buzzed. Blue Tot the Pirate ordered Able Seaman James Varne to phone him a taxi. Phoned for taxi.
- 1203. The coxswain wanted Able Seaman Jordan. Took Able Seaman James Varne ten minutes to find him asleep in the tiller flat. The bos'n's mate again on the gangway when he got back.
- 1213. Blue Tot the Pirate's taxi arrived. Bos'n's mate went to tell him.
- 1214. The captain buzzed. Wanted the chief engineer to report to him in his cabin. Bos'n's mate went aft to look for the chief engineer.
- 1215. Blue Tot the Pirate came down from the wardroom. Able Seaman James Varne manned the gangway and saluted him as he went ashore. Blue Tot the Pirate stopped on shoreside and asked why the bos'n's mate was not on the gangway.

Able Seaman James Varne, 'The captain's sent the bos'n's mate aft, sir.'

'The bos'n's mate should always be on the gangway, Varne.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well remember it, Varne.'

To Blue Tot the Pirate, 'Yes, sir.' To himself, 'Silly-born bastard.'

- 1216. The chief G.I. wanted the gunner's mate. The gunner's mate was ashore at *Tamar* Hospital. Gunner's mate a Columbo pox-case.
- 1217. The bos'n's mate arrived back on gangway. Taxi arrived on shoreside. Midshipman Swanson joined the ship. Bos'n's mate went and informed the officer of the day of his arrival. Carried Midshipman Swanson's baggage below. Three monogrammed suitcases and two cabin trunks.

Yes, sir, James Varne thought. Nothing like travelling in style. No. sir.

1220. The Columbo pox-case came back aboard. Was told the G.I. wanted him.  
'Bollocks!'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion. Yes, sir.

1221. The captain buzzed. Told the bos'n's mate the captain of the *Watling Bay* was expected aboard for cocktails, then ordered bos'n's mate to clean his shoes again.  
1222. Ship's office buzzed. Chief Petty Officer Lyon ordered notices put up ordering next of kin forms to be completed at once.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. We're not going to waste time about winning this Korean War. No, sir.

1223. Taxi arrived. Bos'n's mate informed the captain and the officer of the day, the captain of the *Watling Bay* was about to come aboard. Captain of *Watling Bay* came aboard. Piped the Side. Officer of the day said the call was not long enough, then ordered both to practice piping in the tiller flat for one hour during the dog watches.  
1225. C.-in-C. Far East Imperial Fleet's barge crossing the harbour from Kowloon. The 'Still' and 'Carry-on' both piped. The officer of the day said the piping was atrocious. All the while the officer of the day kept staring at the bos'n's mate.

Yes, sir, James Varne thought. There are more old steamers aboard this bucket than straight low sailors. Yes, sir.

1227. Taxi arrived. Blue Tot the Pirate came back aboard. Saluted him.  
'Here you! Varne! You are Varne?'  
'Yes, sirrrr.'  
'Do you always salute like that?'  
'Yes, sirrrr.'

'You're lazy. Disgustingly lazy.'

'Yes, sirrrr.'

'I don't think you should ever have been in the Imperial Navy. You're not the material of which England's watch-dogs are made.'

'Yes, sirrrr . . . I mean, no, sirrrr.'

'Why did you join the Imperial Navy in the first place?'

'There was no work when it came time to leave the Catholic Children's Protectory. You weren't allowed to leave till you could support yourself so they made me join the Imperial Navy as a Boy Seaman so they could throw me out. It was simple. If I could fight the nuns they thought I could fight for England.'

Blue Tot the Pirate very dignified, 'Varne! You're an impertinent pig, Varne!'

'Yes, sirrrr.' Varne tall and very large in the shade under the deck-awnings.

'You'll have to improve your manners, Varne. Common sailormen do not address their superiors in such a manner. There are special places for the likes of you, Varne.'

'Yes, sirrrr.'

'Shut up! Stand to attention!'

'Yes, sirrrr.'

'Tell me how a common sailorman should salute a superior, Varne.'

'Like this, sirrrr,' said Varne and saluted.

'I said *tell* me, Varne. In your own words, Varne.'

'I don't know, sir. I got no words of my own.'

'Listen carefully then, Varne. The salute is made by bringing up the right hand to the cap, naturally and smartly, but not hurriedly, with the thumb and forefingers closed together, elbow in line with the shoulder, hand and forearm in line, with the palm of the hand turned to the left, but inclined slightly inward. Got that, Varne?'

'Yes, sirrrr.'

'Tell me whom you salute, Varne.'



'Superior officers, sirrrr.'

'Tell me whom you salute, Varne.'

James Varne could think of no reason why he should salute anyone not even superior officers.

'You should be in that special place, Varne.'

'Yes, sirrrr.'

'You would, of course, salute our Imperial Majesty The Queen, Varne. Little boys not yet at school know that, Varne.'

'Yes, sirrrr.'

'You would salute all superior officers of the Imperial Armed Forces. All superior officers in plain clothes. The Colours of the Imperial Navy, Queen's Colours, or White Ensign. The Queen's and Regimental Colours of the Imperial Army, and the Standards of Cavalry Regiments. All funeral processions. The deceased's body. And when a common sailorman is without a cap or carrying anything which prevents him saluting with his right hand, he is to spring smartly to attention and face his superior officer. If riding a bicycle or driving a motor vehicle, the salute is made, subject to the conditions of the traffic permitting, by turning the head smartly towards his superior when passing him. You got that, Varne?'

'Yes, sirrrr.'

'Tell me what I have just told you. Word for word, Varne.'

James Varne could not remember one word of Blue Tot the Pirate's sermon.

'Officer of the day,' said Blue Tot the Pirate. 'Where's the duty petty officer?'

'He's just coming now, sir,' said Flag-Lieutenant Wainwright.

'Then charge this man with dumb insolence towards his superior officer.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

1235. Able Seaman James Varne charged before the

officer of the day with showing dumb insolence to a superior officer, namely the first lieutenant. Remanded under open arrest till following day for first lieutenant's defaulters.

Next day Able Seaman James Varne was sentenced by the first lieutenant at first lieutenant's defaulters to one month's stoppage of leave and fourteen days No. 11's, for showing dumb insolence to the first lieutenant.

James Varne felt no anger towards the first lieutenant. He was guilty of lack of respect to his superior officer. He accepted his punishment gratefully like all good low sailors should. After all, it was a grave charge. To salute is a mark of respect. And to know whom to salute is more important. England is only what she is because of the respect of all those good low nations. Black men, yellow men, brown men, must all show respect to their Sovereign for her taking away all that is rightfully theirs. But of one thing James Varne was not quite clear. The dead man. He did not see how a dead man could acknowledge his mark of respect, or even find comfort in it, if he should be no more, and his body only a cold shell and his eyes blinded.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. And why is this man dead? Out of respect? But then, maybe, the day will come when a dead man gets up in his coffin and salutes a good low sailor. Yes, sir.

It was late in the afternoon. The *Homage* was lying in Tolo Harbour, east of Tathong Channel, close in under the hills, and the hills reflected green on the calm blue water, and it was very hot in the sunlight in the late September afternoon. James Varne had just come off the afternoon watch in the wheelhouse. The watchmen sat round the bare white-scrubbed tables sweating in the shut-down atmosphere of

the watchkeepers' mess below the waterline. Sparky came down the ladder into the mess with the tea fanny.

'You look worn out,' said Varne wiping sweat off his face with a towel.

'I been sweating piss all afternoon,' said Sparky. 'We done so many torpedo runs I was going round in circles.'

'How are torpedoes going to win the Korean War?' a two badge signalman asked. 'The Commies don't even own a battle fleet.'

'The Old Man'll have them fitted with wheels and fire them ashore at the gun emplacements,' said Varne punching holes in a tin of condensed milk. 'He's been reading sea-stories again. All afternoon he's been shouting, "Twenty-five port. Twenty-five, starboard." The wet bastard must've been born on a dodge'em at Southsea Fun Fair.'

'What you think about the Andrew now?' said Sparky to the boy sitting quietly down the end of the starboard after table.

'He wished he joined the Salvation Army,' said Varne.

Suddenly the klaxons overhead started blaring, HUUUUUUUURRRH-ahUUUUUUURRRH-ahUUUUUUURRR.

'Ha-a-a-a-ands to action stations. Ha-a-a-a-ands to action stations,' came the voice across the tannoy.

James Varne was a loading number on 'A' gun. He was wearing his white anti-flash helmet and long-armed gloves before he reached the top of the mess ladder. The fo'c'sle mess was a shambles. Sailors were running everywhere. Varne went down the port passage behind the boy. Damage control parties were already shutting scuttles and battening down deadlights. Up on the fo'c'sle the pair passed the cable weighing party going aft.

The *Homage* was coming round off the land in a tight turn to starboard by the time Varne had the long brass cordite cases on deck. About sixty rounds were laid out and the ammunition hatches open ready for more shells and charges to come up from the magazine.

Varne took his steel helmet off the clip inside the turret and put it on. The helmets were the American type and came down over the ears and the back of the head. They were out of the bay and heading out to sea. Varne peering ahead, head to one side, helmet down over his eyes against

the sun: 'We're making Korea in one hop. You'll get medals in the morning.'

'How far to Korea, Varney?' the captain of the gun asked.

'Must be around a thousand miles,' the boy said.

'Jesus, and us at action stations already,' the layer said.

'The Old Man's taking no chances. Maybe he thinks the Commies know we're coming,' Varne said.

The ship heeled over to port as it came round to starboard and water slopped high over the port guard rails and spattered on the fo'c'sle among the cables and capstans. A light sea was running and the green hills very green and brown rocks standing out of the sea at the foot of the hills and the water very blue breaking very white on the brown rocks; and landward speeding past to starboard. No clouds in the sky. The sky almost white with the brightness of the sun, and only pale blue down on the horizon out on the very blue sea. Everything was hot and hard to the eye, and the heat wet and sticky, and it made you wish you were ten thousand miles from there, sitting in a cold draughty bar with cold beer and outside the rain blown by the wind falling on the greasy wet streets.

'Where the hell we going?' the captain of the gun asked looking at the fast approaching light above the white-painted rocks on Tathong Point.

'The Old Man just declared war on Honk,' Varne said.

'Well he can drop me off down the Wanch,' said the captain of the gun. 'There's a whorehouse there I want to capture single-handed.'

In their blue No. 8 overalls and white anti-flash gear and khaki steel helmets they looked strangely out of place with all the beauty of the sea and the shore about them.

Then the *Homage* heeling over to port again as it swung round and took into Tathong Channel, the light on the point to starboard, and the sea breaking below it and climbing white and lazy over the rocks. The only sound the rushing of the water along the hull, and a fine spray coming over the fo'c'sle by the hawse pipes and dampening the sailors on the fo'c'sle and glistening on their helmets in the sun.

From out by the guard rail Varne could see the decks empty down aft and the water coming over onto the iron-and quarter-decks with the heeling of the ship, and up

ahead the channel empty except for two black-hulled junks tacking the slight breeze coming up channel from the sea. On the bridge, showing through the glass windscreen, were the faces of the gentlemen officers scanning the water ahead; and suddenly the siren starting its whoop-whoop-whooping, and the echoes coming back off the high hills of Lei Yue Mun Channel.

'Attention the lower-deck! Attention,' came the voice of Blue Tot the Pirate across the tannoy. 'We are expected to be in action in about twenty minutes time. One of our motor launches has been engaged with gunfire in the Pearl River. That is all.'

'There you are,' said Varne. 'You get medals already.'

'Either that or a bastard box,' the layer said.

'That's respect,' said Varne. 'I'll salute you as you go down the hole.'

'Can I count on that?' the layer said.

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'You can count on that. Afterward I'll get pissed sky-high on San Mig and shove one of those chink pushers out the Luk Kwok up the stick, then I'll call the sprog Tubby Whiting so you'll go on living Yung Chow style for ever.'

'That's good on you,' the layer said.

'Don't mention it,' said Varne. 'Just give me ten bucks now for the piss up.'

'Take a jump in the oggin.'

'That's not much to take a jump at, is it?' said Varne. 'Have you got a granny?'

The *Homage* was doing twenty knots, which is quite some speed in harbour, especially a harbour such as Hong Kong, which has only an anchorage for merchant shipping; except on the Kowloon side where there are two or three jetties up by the ferry landing-stage. The *Homage* was well over on the Hong Kong side of the harbour. The waterfront was thronged with Chinese.

'Look at all these bastards,' the layer said.

'Looks like they know more about this gun battle than we do,' said the captain of the gun.

'Tell me something a chink don't know,' said Varne.

The high watch-tower on Green Island down the end of the harbour was sending Morse so fast it seemed like one

long stream of light. One of the signalmen was out on the port wing of the bridge replying on a searchlight. On the flag-deck someone ran up two flags. Right ahead a big black Dutchman on the Hong Kong-Manila run lay at the innermost buoy to shoreside. The *Homage* swung a few points to starboard and ran the Dutchman close down on the port side. As they passed, high above on the poop-deck, a sailor in a vest threw swill from a bucket into the harbour.

'I hope to Christ those chinks have the boom open,' the layer said. A long line of huge anchor buoys were chained right the way across the end of the harbour to prevent smugglers running in contraband through Sulphur Channel.

'Put your water-wings on,' said Varne. 'Because if they haven't we'll never stop now.'

Off the Hong Kong side a police launch was running full ahead towing the boom out. The *Homage* ran it to ten yards to starboard and heeled sharply as it put Lantau Island on the starboard beam. Astern, the police launch stood on her bow and stern time about in the high combing wash.

They sighted the motor launch, small and grey, close in under a high hill, sloping down darkly green right to the water. No one was about on her deck. No other ship was in the vicinity. No sound of gunfire. Nothing—just the launch, and the darkly green hill, and a few houses, white with yellow thatched roofs, close to the shore on the furthestmost side of the hill, everything peaceful-looking in the sun, and only the water on the hull of the ship, and not even birds in the sky.

'What's that hill?' the boy asked.

'That's the China mainland. That's Communist,' said Varne.

'Is it?' he said staring at the hill.

The *Homage* cut speed, came round in a wide circle to port and inshore to the launch to starboard about five hundred yards away. The chief G.I. went up onto the fo'c'sle. 'Varne! Varne, come on!' Varne went back along the fo'c'sle. The chief had a revolver buckled onto the green webbing belt he wore. They went down the starboard side onto the iron-deck abaft the motor boat. The *Homage* had stopped and was lying to, broadside to shore. The guns were still trained fore and aft. Astern were small islands close

inshore, boulder strewn, with bracken growing amongst the boulders. No one moved on the islands, not even birds flew in the sky above. It was very quiet and still out there. The chief came back and gave Varne a Lanchester.

'You know how to use that?'

Varne looked at the holes in the barrel. 'Yeah,' he said, 'pull the trigger.'

The chief looked at him, 'Yeah. That's right. Pull the trigger.'

'You want I shoot myself?' Varne grinning.

'Get in the boat.'

The gunner's mate and a leading stoker were already in the boat when Varne climbed up the davit and got in.

'You got rid of that dose yet?' Varne asked the gunner's mate.

'Yeah. I got my bubbly back last week.'

'Blob up and no bubbly,' said Varne.

'Yeah. No bubbly,' said the gunner's mate and put his Lanchester between his knees and wiped the sweat off his hands onto his shirt. The stoker sat at the engine looking across at the hill. Four more sailors got into the boat all armed with Lanchesters. They were crammed in on the seats under the wooden canopy. Then the chief, and the flag-lieutenant, and the surgeon-lieutenant climbed in. They wore revolvers and the surgeon carried a first aid haversack slung over his shoulder. They sat in the stern behind the stoker at the engine, who had now given up staring at the hill. From out the port Varne saw there was still no one about on deck on the launch. On deck someone gave orders for lowering the boat and they went down smoothly till just short of the water, and suddenly the disengaging gear was slipped and they hit the water with a splash. The coxswain of the boat went past outboard of the canopy with a boat-hook and bore the bows off. The stoker started the engine and they swung away from the ship and headed inshore, everyone cramped and holding their Lanchesters, and the chief standing up steering with the tiller between his knees.

The coxswain went up in the bows with the boat-hook. The stoker cut the engine, and they came slowly alongside the launch. The flag-lieutenant had his revolver in his hand.

With a gentle thud and scrape they were alongside and the sailors scrambled out from under the canopy onto the deck of the launch.

The first thing they felt was the smell. The smell of burnt cordite and burst metal and burnt paint; and that hot sweet smell of death. The deck was a shambles. The small plywood bridge holed and smashed. Up for'ard on the short, narrow fo'c'sle was the four-pounder gun which looked much like a sawn-off shotgun. The metal of the butts and the shoulder cushions had been torn away and the barrel pointed vertically into the sky. Under the gun a dead sailor lay crumpled round the foot of the mounting, his right arm missing from the shoulder and a hole through his chest and the ribs protruding white and splintered.

Varne went aft to the bridge. The chief and the surgeon were at the bottom of the ladder. The surgeon leaned down and picked up a foot and threw it onto the bridge. The lieutenant in charge of the launch and the petty officer coxswain both lay on the bridge. The bridge was shattered and the grey paintwork scorched and blood on the deck and on the bulkheads. Everywhere were bullet holes and their going on out across the bridge. Looking at the bullet holes the firing had been very close and methodical.

Suddenly someone screamed. Varne was first down the hatch. A sailor lay at the foot of the accommodation ladder covered in blood.

'Hello. Hello, wings. You're all right,' said Varne softly.

He lay with his hands holding his stomach, eyes opened wide, and his mouth opening and closing silently and blood trickling down his chin. Varne stepped over him and got on his knees. He could not see where he was hit for all the blood. His legs were tangled up underneath him too. All that moved was his mouth. The surgeon came down the ladder.

'He still alive?'

'Yeah. His mouth moves. Look!'

The surgeon stepped off the ladder over his head.

'I think he's got it in the legs. I think his legs are broke,' Varne said and moved out the way to let the surgeon get close.

'We'll have to get him up top,' the surgeon said. 'Get him laid out. That's the best way.'



The chief put his head in the hatchway. 'What we doing, sir?'

'We're getting him up top. You stay there and get your hands under his arms when we get him up.'

The chief lay on the deck on his stomach and leaned in the hatchway.

'Get him under the arms, Varne, and lift him up for the chief. Don't let him take his weight and for God's sake don't let him fall.'

Varne got his hands under his arm-pits and slowly lifted upward. He had the sailor's head on his shoulder and did not look at his face. He had him almost up to the chief when he screamed. A scream choked and deep down.

'Wait!' yelled the surgeon.

Varne held the body up against the ladder and looked down. The surgeon had a knife out his haversack. The leg was twitching and back to front and the surgeon hacking with the knife; and the leg dropping off from under the shorts. All the while only the mouth moved and the eyes stared.

'It's the legs all right,' the surgeon said. 'The other isn't too bad. . . . Wait!' He made a slip-knot with a piece of white strapping and put it on the stump under the leg of the shorts and pulled till his face tremored with the pressure. 'That's it,' he said and got a morphine needle out the haversack and jabbed it in high on the hip of the good leg. 'All right! Get him up!' Varne heaved upward, feeling the leg lying across his feet.

'Right!' said the chief.

The body went out the hatch, the one leg dragging.

Up on deck everyone stood about looking at each other and trying not to think.

'He's the only one alive,' said the flag-lieutenant.

'All right,' said the surgeon. 'Get him in the boat and take him back. I'll go with him. You don't need me now.'

'Ask what we do with these . . .' said the flag-lieutenant, head inclined towards the bodies laid out on the deck for'ard.

The surgeon climbed into the boat. 'I'll do that.'

'Yes. There's none of them whole.'

They stood on the deck and watched the boat on the way back to the ship with the sailor with the one leg and the surgeon. The chief and flag-lieutenant went below to see

if the launch was making any water. The sun was going down. The only sound was the water lapping the hull. It was very quiet. The launch had not drifted any, though close in shore you could not see the white houses with their yellow thatched roofs, but the hill was still there, high and green and the green tinged with the red of the sun, and downstream towards the New Territories the small islands growing dark as the sun went down across the estuary in the direction of Macao and Kwangchow, and beyond, Hainan. Out on the estuary on the open water were the far-off bat shapes of junks heading in for Macao, and the small cluster of lights on the horizon just off the coast that was the ferry on its way to Hong Kong. It was about forty miles to Macao.

When the boat came back it was dark; the boat with its red and green and white navigation lights on, and carrying two A.B.s with rolls of canvas.

'You got to stick the other bods in that,' one of the A.B.s said and heaved the rolls onto the deck of the launch.

'Right! Get busy,' said the flag-lieutenant, 'and make sure you get all the bits and pieces.'

The gunner's mate hacked up the canvas with his jack-knife while the others collected the dead. The way they were they only made small bundles. It was hard to believe you could take up so little room dead.

An Aldis lamp started flashing from the bridge of the *Homage*. The flag-lieutenant watched it and his mouth moving slowly in the dark as he read. It was altogether dark now with stars showing in the clear black sky and the air hot and damp with humidity. The smell had got worse too with the mess on deck drying up. The Aldis lamp stopped flashing.

'The bodies are going back to the ship,' said the flag-lieutenant. 'They all ready?'

Varne remembered the mess-deck. 'The leg. Did anybody get the leg?'

They looked at him in the dark, no one moving, no one speaking. Then: 'You better get it if you know where it is,' said the flag-lieutenant.

Varne went below and got the leg. When he came back on deck: 'Put it in one of the bundles,' the chief said.

'It don't belong to any of them,' said Varne.

'It don't matter. Put it in one of the bundles. They're not particular.'

Varne put it in a bundle that already had two legs and another foot.

They loaded the dead into the boat, and stood waiting on deck. The flag-lieutenant called out the gunner's mate and a young A.B. from 'Y' gun.

'You stay aboard. We're being towed back to Hong Kong. The rest of you get in the boat.'

No one wanted to sit beside the canvas bundles. They all sat on top of the canopy, Lanchesters across their knees, the coxswain at the tiller and the stoker sat with his hand on the throttle of the engine.

They came up on the starboard side down aft by the Sick Bay and made fast. A work party had been organized to take the bundles aboard. Up on 'X' gun-deck that housed the Squid-throwers the navigation officer and the midshipman were shooting pictures with flash bulbs of the dead coming aboard.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. The only time a gentleman officer ever took my photograph, and I'm heaving a dead man wrapped in canvas through the guard rails. Yes, sir.

The *Homage* steamed slowly up harbour, close inshore to Victoria City, with the launch towed astern on the end of a manila. The eight bodies wrapped in canvas lay on the iron-deck under the ship's bell by the open engine-room hatches. Action stations had been stood down, and Varne was amidships dressed in whitefront and shorts ready to take over the first watch.

The sick berth attendant came up starboard side wearing his whites. He was a thin little man going bald. Some of the young A.B.s and ordinary seaman stood about taking pictures

of the bundles. Outboard to starboard shone the bright lights of Victoria City, and people going down to the ferry for Kowloon; and you could hear music come across the flat black water from the whorehouses and bars around the Criminal Courts in the Central District, and the buildings of the Hong Kong-Shanghai Banking Corporation and The Communist Bank of China floodlit, standing very tall and white against the high black hills beyond the city.

'How are you, Taff?' said Varne.

'Oh, all right,' he said without enthusiasm, and looking at the lights and at some people going aboard a coast steamer lying at the jetty across the street from Butterfield and Swire's shipping office.

'How's that fellow in the bay?' Varne asked.

'He's dead. Died about ten minutes ago. He lost too much blood before we got him.'

'That's them all then,' said Varne looking at the bundles.

'Yes. Them all,' said Taff staring at the lights ashore.

One of the young A.B.s came across with his camera. 'I hear you say that other bod's dead too?'

Taff nodded without looking around.

'Why don't you go take his picture?' Varne suddenly.

'He'll maybe hold his stump up for you.'

'Very funny! But these could be worth a lot of money,' said the young A.B. tapping his camera. 'I got some good ones of the launch too.'

'What you mean?' said Taff turning around.

'The newspapers at home. They'd buy the pictures. I'll maybe write something about it too.'

'Who are you?' Varne asked, 'Remarque?'

'Who the hell's Remarque?'

'You don't know Remarque?'

'Never heard of him.'

'You're a moron. You sign on in the Andrew for your pension. It's the best place for you.'

'What you mean?'

'You're wasting your time. Ditch that film in the oggin and go ashore and shoot some chink pusher flat on her back on a straw mat with her legs open. Then send them home to your old man, he'll flog them round the Dilly. That's your line. Forget you ever heard of Remarque.'

'I can't see how you got so much to say. You can't even stay out the nick.'

'That's because I seen it all already. Go on, beat it, before I give you a bunch of fives!'

The *Homage* docked under a crane on the jetty outside of *Tamar* basin. Flood-lights had been rigged on the legs of the crane. Some large cars and two ambulances were parked under the crane between the four legs, and many gentlemen officers walking about, gold braid gleaming under the flood-lights, and them walking about trying to look very important. The captain came down from his cabin wearing a starched white uniform and went ashore. Much saluting took place on the jetty then the captain got into one of the cars and drove off. Afterward the duty part of the watch turned out to take the bodies ashore to the ambulances.

'You remember what the first lieutenant said about saluting?' said the navigation officer.

'Yes, sir,' said Varne.

'We salute the dead, Varne.'

'Yes, sir.'

They stood at attention and saluted each of the eight bodies wrapped in canvas, and the blanket-covered stretcher from the bay: they saluted them all, each and every one—but not one got up and returned their salute.

No, sir. James Varne thought. Not even out of respect. No, sir.

After the ambulances and the cars had left the jetty, and when the Chinese dockyard electricians had taken down the flood-lights from the crane, a Star taxi with suitcases and trunks piled on top drew up at the gangway.

'Hey!' Varne said to the boy. 'You heard if we're expecting anybody?'

'Nobody told me anything,' the boy said.

Two gentlemen officers had climbed out the taxi, and stood looking at the ship. One was a lieutenant, a big man with a bushy beard. He was running to fat, and his white uniform was tight and the brass buttons down the front of his tunic were strained till they brought up ridges in the starched duckcloth. The other was a commissioned gunner. He was short, and kept wiping the sweat off his face with a white handkerchief while the Chinese driver lifted the baggage down off the roof of the taxi.

The navigation officer came up aft from the quarter-deck. They all saluted as the two came aboard.

'Lieutenant Parfet and Commissioned Gunner Roberts joining, sir,' said the one with the beard.

'I say! I say, sir! With all this excitement I'm afraid we dashed well forgot about you chaps,' said the navigation officer.

'We've been waiting in *Tamar* wardroom.'

'Ah, then! Perhaps it hasn't been so tiresome?'

'No! Not at all,' the one with the beard said. 'Jolly nice evening altogether.' When he spoke there was the smell of gin in the hot night air. The gunner kept wiping his face and running his finger round the collar of his tunic.

'Varne! See that all the baggage is stowed in the after cabin flat.'

'Yes, sir. Which cabin?'

'Lieutenant Parfet will be sharing with Lieutenant Wainwright and Mr. Roberts with Mr. Gale.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Come along, you chaps. We'll go on up to the wardroom.' They went along the iron-deck and up the ladder on to the fo'c'sle.

Varne looked at the baggage lying on the jetty, and at the American-style taxi driving up the jetty and the large white star painted on the boot disappearing in the dark. 'We better get that lot aboard. It looks like they come to stay.' They went ashore and brought the suitcases and trunks aboard. One suitcase with the gilt letters C.J.P. stamped on it had two tennis rackets in covers strapped to it.

'You see that?' said Varne pointing at the rackets. 'We got athletes aboard. Can you imagine that bearded bastard

skipping around on a tennis court? Christ, I want to be there when he does that. Christ, I do—a bearded hippo in french knickers flying around like a fairy.'

They carried the baggage into the after flat passage outside the sick bay and stacked it by the hatch leading down to the after cabin flat.

'You know where to put them?' Varne asked the boy.

'Yes. Lieutenant Parfet goes in with the flag-lieutenant.'

'Okay. You better get a tackle from the Buffer's kabush and lower the trunks down. I'll go back on the gangway.'

No one was about on the upper-deck. Varne saw the boy go back down aft on the port side with a tackle from the bos'n's locker.

'Quartermaster! Quartermaster!' The navigation officer stood on the fo'c'sle at the top of the ladder.

'Yes, sir?' said Varne walking for'ard.

'The captain won't probably be back aboard till early morning. You'll tell the middle watch Q.M.?'

'Yes, sir. I'll write that down and pin it to the board, sir.'

'Yes, do that. And, Varne! I'll be in the wardroom if I'm required.'

Varne went back on the gangway and wrote out the note and pinned it to the board. There was not much to see from the gangway except the black shapes of the sheds and buildings in the darkness of the dockyard. Varne opened the lid of the desk to get another signal pad out. The desk was empty except for the large box of contraceptives there for the benefit of sailors going ashore.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. French letters for low sailors by order of the Imperial Admiralty. Yes, sir.

The boy lowered the trunks down the hatch with the tackle. Afterward he brought the suitcases down and set the trunks back against the after bulkhead of the flat outside the

cabins. It was very hot below and condensation glistened on the white paint of the bulkheads. Mr. Gale was not in his cabin on the port side. He set Mr. Robert's cases down against the empty bunk.

A photograph stood on top of a set of chest of drawers. Mr. Gale in full ceremonial uniform stood by a woman in a white wedding dress. She was little and fat and wore spectacles. Also she was very ugly and the spectacles made her eyes appear to stand out of her head. Mr. Gale and his wife did not look a very romantic couple even with all that white silk and gold braid.

The boy pushed open the door of the other cabin with his foot and went in with a suitcase in either hand. A table lamp on the writing desk was lit and shaded the cabin with soft light. He put the suitcases by the unmade bunk by the open scuttle and turned to go out. 'Oh! I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know you were in, sir.'

Lieutenant Wainwright stubbed his cigarette out on the ashtray on the table by his bunk in the recess by the door. 'Carry on. That's right. You're Worrall, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir. Worrall, sir.'

'I suppose those cases are Lieutenant Parfet's?' said Wainwright looking at the boy.

'Yes, sir. That's his, sir. He just came aboard with a commissioned gunner, sir.'

'That's the new torpedo officer, Worrall.'

'Yes, sir . . . I mean, is it, sir?'

'Where are they? Are they coming down?'

'They've gone up to the wardroom with the officer of the day, sir.'

Wainwright smiling: 'I see. Pissing-up, I suppose?'

The boy looked at the door then pulled his long woollen stockings up to below his knees.

'What's the matter, Worrall?' Wainwright still smiling.

'Oh . . . nothing, sir. I'm just going to get the other case, sir.'

'Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, Worrall. Fetch it.'

The boy went out and brought in the suitcase.



'Before you go, Worrall, open that door under the desk and let me have that bottle.'

He set the suitcase down and opened the door of the desk. 'Which bottle do you want, sir? There's two—one of Cinzano and one of gin.'

'How much gin is there?'

He took out the dark green bottle and held it against the light. 'There's about half there, sir.'

'Bring them both then.'

He put both bottles on the table by the bunk: 'Is that all, sir?'

'Get those two glasses off the wash-basin.'

'Both, sir?' said the boy looking puzzled.

'You want a drink, don't you?'

'Me, sir?'

'What's the matter? You afraid I'll eat you?'

'No, sir . . . I mean . . .'

'Forget it. Get those glasses. And swill them out first. I don't like bloody toothpaste in my gin.' Wainwright grinning.

The boy got the glasses and put them on the table. Wainwright looked up at him standing by the table with his eyes cast down at the glasses. Suddenly:

'Sit down, Worrall.'

'Sit down, sir?' said Worrall, his words not above a whisper.

'That's what I said, didn't I?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well sit down then.'

The boy went across and sat on a chair by the desk.

'Not there, Worrall. Don't be so prudish. Park your arse here,' said Wainwright throwing off the sheet and sitting up and slapping his open hand on the edge of the bunk. The boy swallowed and looked at Lieutenant Wainwright sitting on the bed naked, and the fan above on the deck-head whirling slowly and silently round and the air gently moving the lieutenant's black curling hair.

'Sit down for Christsake, boy. Have you never seen a naked man before?'

'Yes, sir . . . I mean, no, sir . . . I . . .'

Wainwright quietly, 'I know what you mean, Worrall.'

Sit down. You're standing there like a schoolgirl who knows what she wants but doesn't know where to find it.'

The boy sat down at the foot of the bunk. Lieutenant Wainwright poured gin into the glasses then filled them up with Cinzano. 'Here. Drink up. It'll put lead in your pencil.'

The boy attempted a grin as he took the glass. Lieutenant Wainwright drank half of his in two gulps. 'Aaaah! Not bad. Not as good as ver-gin, but good enough. You ever had a ver-gin, Worrall?'

The boy drank very slowly in small mouthfuls, not feeling the taste, and hoping Lieutenant Wainwright would have forgotten all about virgins when he put the glass down.

'You hear me, Worrall?'

'What? What, sir?'

'You ever had a ver-gin, Worrall?'

Afterwards: 'A virgin, sir? No, sir.'

Lieutenant Wainwright smiled. 'I don't mean a virgin in knickers, Worrall. Or without as the case may be. I mean a gin and vermouth.'

The boy grinned with relief. 'Oh, no, sir. I don't often drink. Just a brown ale now and then, sir.'

'Well, well,' Wainwright smiling. 'I suppose you don't go with women either?' The boy raised his glass and slowly drank. Lieutenant Wainwright lit a cigarette and waited for him to put his glass down. 'Well, Worrall, do you?'

'Pardon, sir?'

'Do you go with women?'

The boy wiped the sweat off his cheeks with his arm, then pulled his stockings up. Lieutenant Wainwright lay back on the bunk, then quietly: 'You don't want to go with any of these bitches ashore you know, Worrall.'

'No, sir.' The boy in agreement but not looking at him.

'No, Worrall. You can get V.D. and all sorts of diseases.'

'Yes, sir. I know—I'll have to get back on the gangway now, sir. Varne will be wondering where I got to, sir.'

'Yes, he will, if I know Varne. Finish your drink then.'

The boy drained his glass swiftly and set it on the table.

'Come here.'

'There's somebody coming, sir.'

'The after passage is right overhead. You can hear them come down the ladder.'

'But Varne will——'

'Come here.'

It was twenty minutes to midnight. Varne went down to the mess and woke the quartermaster of the middle watch. Going back down the port passage he met Sparky coming out of the wireless office.

'Christ almighty,' said Sparky, 'What a watch. Everybody's on the air. Typhoon Sheila's coming this way too. She's veered off Kyushu and running parallel with the Ryukyu Islands. She's expected to hit south Formosa and make for Honk.'

'Charming,' said Varne. 'You taking that signal round?'

'Yeah. They want a bastard donkey for this job.'

'The Old Man's ashore.'

'He'll be off pissing-up with these other pigs and telling them how sorry he is he didn't win any medals this afternoon.'

'Never mind. We'll be in Singapree for Christmas.'

'I'd rather stay here. Fanny's twice as cheap.'

'You got anything to eat? I'm starving.'

'I got a tin of herrings-in,' said Sparky grinning.

'We'll have big cats in a couple of minutes then,' said Varne going on down the passage.

When he arrived on the gangway the boy was stood by the guard rails staring at the lights of the houses on the Peak above Victoria City.

'Where you been?' asked Varne.

The boy suddenly coming back from the lights and turning, 'Oh, those trunks. I couldn't get them below. They were awfully heavy you know.'

'Well, you better go wake your relief now. I don't know where he sleeps.'

'Just now?' said the boy almost staring again.

'You can leave him if you want to do the middle as well,' said Varne, those very blue eyes so very dark in the night. The boy turned and went for'ard without speaking. Sparky passed him with his tin of herrings-in.

'You got off sharp,' said Varne.

Sparky grinned. 'It's these O.D.s. Always on the job before time. Keep the foes from England's shores and all that shit. I got a new loaf in the galley too.'

'My guts feel like they caved in,' said Varne.

'You hear the latest? We move out to No. 3 buoy in the morning if Sheila keeps headed this way.'

'Christ! That means we won't get a run ashore tomorrow.'

'I don't know. There's a burial party going ashore anyhow. Those bods get buried tomorrow.'

'They don't waste much time.'

'It's got something to do with the heat. They go off quick or something.'

The boy came back on the gangway.

'You find him?' Varne asked.

'Yes. He's sleeping in the seamen's mess in the canteen flat.'

Varne looked at the clock. 'That's about it, wings. You nip round the galley, Sparks, and start hacking up those sandwiches. I'll be with you in a minute.'

'Rightyo,' said Sparky and went for'ard with his tin of herrings-in.

Lieutenant Wainwright came up starboard side and looked at them as he went past. 'Your cap isn't straight, Worrall,' he said. The boy pulled his cap on square across his forehead. Lieutenant Wainwright went on up the ladder to the wardroom on the fo'c'sle.

'He's a miserable bastard,' said Varne.

'Yes,' said the boy looking out across the harbour to Kowloon.

Over in Kowloon a ferry had just left the jetty and the ringing of the telegraph bells carried faintly across the flat black water in the still night.

'That's a nice time to go drinking—midnight,' said Varne staring after Wainwright.

'Yes,' said the boy.

'Was he in his cabin when you took the baggage in?'

'Yes—yes, he was sleeping,' said the boy in the dark.

'Proper thing too. I wouldn't trust that bastard with a tin of bangers.'

When Varne was wakened at ten minutes to four, the air was much cooler and a rising wind blew in the wind-scoops in the open scuttles, and outboard the water slopped against the hull, and the sound of it falling upon itself, and the starboard side riding gently with soft thuds against the catamarans along the jetty. He lay listening in the dark of the mess and an occasional long low swell sweeping in the harbour from the channel lifted the ship slightly and she would go down with a creaking and groaning of the catamarans and the rattling of their chains.

Sparky got off the port locker cushions and lit a cigarette. 'There's quite a blow getting up.'

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'Sheila must be quite a way off too.'

Sparky scratching himself. 'I'm having no more of those bastard herrings-in before I go to kip. They been coming back on me all night.'

'Same here,' said Varne sitting up. 'I got a taste in my mouth like the crutch of Aggie's knickers.'

'Well, I'll see you about six when I get the tea on,' said Sparky going up the ladder.

Varne had to strike matches up top in the fo'c'sle mess to see his way out. Camp-beds and lockers took up all the free deck space, and above, hammocks were slung everywhere. It was black dark outside. From the doorway of the port passage you saw the lights of Kowloon across the harbour clustered into a long straggling mass which disappeared into the black hills of the New Territories. At the first harbour buoy astern was a big Swedish cargo-passenger that did the Makasar and Djakarta run. Apart from her the main

harbour seemed empty. Right astern on the port quarter a few masthead lights showed towards the storm anchorage and towards Stonecutter's Island.

At six o'clock Varne piped Call the Hands then went along to the wireless office.

'How is it outside?' asked Sparky.

'Clouded right over and pissing cats and dogs,' said Varne, the rain off his oilskin forming pools on the brown cortisine. 'That big Swede astern has just upped it and gone out. There's one thing though—the way the wind and water is coming in the harbour it's going to blow all the shit across to Macao.'

'Christ! What a treat. All nighters with no stink.'

An ordinary telegraphist came in with a jug of tea. Sparky set the cups out and poured it.

'You heard if we're going to sea?' said Varne pouring milk from a tin.

'Nothing yet,' said Sparky. 'It's bad outside too. We picked up a call from a Yank destroyer in the Formosa Straits about five o'clock. She lost a couple of ratings over the side.' Varne finished his tea and went back on the gangway. The boy was huddled in a corner by the engine-room hatches trying to keep out of the heavy grey rain sweeping up harbour. It had got as light as it would get all day. A thin watery light that made Victoria City look like it was a steel engraving. Now the air was filled with the noise of rising waters and the groaning of catamarans and the shrieking of the wind in the aerals and in the halyards. A stoker came up out of the engine-room and stood on deck in the wind and rain, breathing deeply, and wiping sweat off his bare chest and shoulders with a towel.

'Hey, Varne! Varne!' The chief G.I. came down the ladder from the twin-Bofor gun-deck.

'What's up?' shouted Varne into the wind.

'That burial's at eleven o'clock. I want you in full whites ready at ten. You'll get a rifle and webbing from the gunner's mate.'

'I'm not a gunnery rating.'

'I know, but I got to have big fellows.'

'But my face don't go with a funeral, Chief.'

'That's too bad. You're coming just the same,' he said and

read out a list of names. They were eleven sailors from the duty watch. They were mourners.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. At any funeral you got to have mourners. Whether they are genuine mourners or not makes no difference—as long as they look like mourners—and anyone ordered to a funeral against his will must surely have the look of a mourner. Yes, sir.

The wind was fierce and blew continually and the rain cut across the dark green of the trees and lashed the white buildings, and the great black clouds driven by the wind tearing past above the rooftops: and the rain on the brown earth of the fresh dug grave in Happy Valley Cemetery.

They stood facing into the wind. The rain stung their faces and ran down their necks and under their black oilskins: the rain streaming off their oilskins and soaking through their trousers and down their gaiters into their boots. The rain soaked in everywhere, and they could not hear the words of the burial service, or the notes of the buglers, and all they saw were the faces of the buglers straining red through the rain. Always the rain.

The lowerers did not waste time, and as soon as the last of the nine white boxes were in the ground the wet brown earth was being shovelled into the hole to hide them; and all the while the mourners standing wet in the rain looking their most mournful.

When the gentlemen officers had left in their cars, the burial party marched through the rain along the gravel paths between the broad swards of green grass with their military straight line of standing gravestones, and then marching through the rain to the gateway among the tall knotted palms. The chief dismissed them out on the roadway and they climbed into the lorries along with the mourners. And

out across the cemetery the rain falling on the grave, and no one about, no one, and only the clouds, and the wind, and the rain falling. Always the rain.

The *Homage* had been tied up in the Singapore Imperial Navy Dockyard for a week undergoing a minor refit. It was Christmas Eve and leave had been granted to all but the duty watch. The dockyard was a long way from Singapore itself and those sailors going ashore there had to go by bus. Those not wishing to travel that far to get drunk walked up the road from the dockyard to Terror Barracks. The barracks were on a hill overlooking the dockyard.

Varne and Sparky went up to the Barracks early in the evening. The canteen was at the bottom of the hill on the foreshore behind the dining-hall. Rumour had it that the place was used as a whorehouse during the war for Japanese suicide pilots. Also it was said that any whore who contracted V.D. or grew stale from overwork was promptly thrown into the river from a small jetty downshore from the canteen.

It was a very nice canteen. There were coconut palms growing on the hill behind it, and above, the sun shone hot in the clear blue sky, and the water of the river was a very deep blue and lapped gently against the green shore; and across the wide river was the dark green foliage of the thick Malayan jungle sweltering under the hard hot sun.

The two sailors sweated as they went down the sandy path on the face of the hill. A small wicked-looking red and green snake lay dead to one side of the path.

'Christ, I wouldn't like to get pissed and go to kip out here,' said Sparky looking at the snake.

'No,' said Varne. 'Not with things like that crawling about.'

'They go in for things like that out here, don't they? Snakes, rats, and Bombay Runners.'



'I don't know where they get their big eats from with everybody else starving.'

'Maybe they eat each other?'

'Yeah. That's it. They eat each other,' said Varne coming to the bottom of the path.

They went into the canteen and ordered two pints of Tiger beer. The beer was ice cold and the glasses wet and beaded on the outside. They carried the beer out to the veranda and sat on bamboo chairs at a wicker table and lit cigarettes and sat in the cool breeze coming in off the river and drank cold beer. Soon afterward the canteen began to fill up and become a little noisy. A number of petty officers wearing white shirts and civilian trousers came down from the barracks. The remainder were sailors in whitefronts and duckcloth trousers.

Some of the sailors had monkeys on long leads. The monkeys were very funny. The sailors bought them beer, and when they got a little drunk they would go jumping around on the floor and run sheer up the walls and swing off the lights; and when they got really drunk they would fight with each other till exhausted when they would finally lie on their backs on the floor with their arms and legs shot straight in the air like they were dead.

After the sun had gone down and stars were beginning to appear in the sky, Petty Officer Walters came in onto the veranda and across to the table.

'Hello, you two. What you doing here? I thought you'd have been bagging-off in Singapree.'

'We don't have the inclination,' Varne said. Walters laughed.

'What's up with you?' Sparky asked. 'You got a giggle like a chorus girl on the blunt end of a pineapple.'

'Ooooooh,' Walters said. 'Can they manage that too?'

'They manage more than that. When I was in the Ulster Flotilla we once caught a pusher in Larne sat over one of the four inchers on the fo'c'sle after a piss up in the wardroom.

'The bitch! Was the tampion out?'

'Anyway,' Varne cut in, 'What you doing here?'

'Don't you know? There's two P. and O. boats out in the Roads. They always come up here when they come ashore. Oh, la, la,' said Walters with one hand on his hip and the

other behind his head. Three sailors at a nearby table grinned and made jokes among themselves. Walters was like that. It gave him a certain satisfaction to know that other people knew about him. Not that he ever used cosmetics or exaggerated any feminine mannerisms. He just did not mind who knew about him being that way. People could say almost anything to him. He was never offended. 'What are you two drinking?' he asked.

'Tigers,' Varne said.

'I'll get them for you. Can you get me a chair?'

Varne had a chair for him when he came back. Walters set the glasses on the table. Two pints of Tiger beer and a large gin and lime. He sat down and raised his glass. 'Here's to the admiral surgeon's daughter.'

'Cheers,' Varne said and drank.

'Okay,' said Sparky resignedly, 'What about the admiral surgeon's daughter?'

'Don't you know? All the barracks know,' Walters said and drank again. 'Had a sprog this morning.'

'What's strange about that?' Varne asked. 'Pushers have sprogs all the time.'

'I know. But she's started early. She's only thirteen.'

'The best of luck to her,' Varne said. 'When's she get married?'

'She can't. It was one of the houseboys. It's a two and one sprog.'

A fight broke out between two monkeys drinking on a table inside the canteen. Afterward Walters told them the story about the Fairy and the Monkey. He was telling them the one about the Office Girl and the Inkstand when Varne got up and went round to the barber shop the other side of the canteen for a haircut.

It was a quite small but modern shop. The barber, like all good barbers, was a Chinaman. Two young Chinese girls wearing white nylon overalls sat in chairs down the end of the shop looking at picture magazines.

'Haircut, tosh,' Varne said entering the shop.

'Yessa, yessa,' said the Chinaman and flung a large blue and white striped sheet over him when he sat in the chair. 'Poscads? Poscads, John?'

'A haircut,' Varne said.

'Yessa! A hailcut. Yessa! Maybe you likee see poscads? Velly good poscads. Chlismas cads too.'

'Okay,' Varne said. 'But get on with the haircut.'

'Yessa,' said the Chinaman smiling. 'Yessa. Numma one Chlismas cads.' He snapped his fingers to the girls. One of them put down her magazine and got up and went over to a drawer under the sink. The barber started using the clippers on the back of Varne's neck. The girl brought him some large brown envelopes. The other girl brought a bamboo fan and stood by the chair. Varne opened the envelopes and the girl with the fan stopped waving it, looked at the other girl and both giggled. The postcards were good, but the Christmas cards were unique. They were more than that, there were never any Christmas cards that conveyed the feeling of goodwill like these ones. There were photographs of a number of men and women so positioned to spell MERRY CHRISTMAS.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. They must have had a very Merry Christmas too. Yes, sir.

He put them back in the envelopes. 'No thanks, tosh. I got no one to send them to anyhow.'

'You sendee gil at home,' the barber said. 'Velly good. Gil likee. Lemember alla happy times befo.'

'I don't have a girl,' said Varne. 'Besides, it's too late for Christmas.'

'You sendee alla same. Not natta about Chlismas. Gil velly filled.'

'No. No thanks, tosh.' Varne losing patience.

'Good bagain. Now too late Chlismas I cutee plice. Velly cheap.'

'Just get on with the haircut, tosh.'

'Hokay. Hokay. Velly solly you no buy.' The haircut went all right for two minutes then the Chinaman leaned over him. 'Manacue?' he inquired, smiling a smile that displayed a complete upper set of gold teeth.

'No thanks. No manicure.'

'Velly good manacue.'

'No thanks.'

'I lecommend. Numma one.'

'Get on with the haircut,' said Varne staring in the mirror with those very blue eyes at the Chinaman.

'But why you no likee? Velly cleva gil.'

The girl with the fan stopped fanning and smiled. She was a very pretty girl.

'I don't want a manicure. For Jesus' sake just give me the haircut.'

'Hokay. Hokay. No get angly.' He started clipping again and muttering in Chinese.

'Now what's the matter?' said 'Varne rising half out the chair.

'Too many China balbel. Not muchee money. Nobody wantee manacue—you no likee manacue?' The Chinaman hopefully.

'Okay,' Varne giving up. 'Now get mobile with the haircut.'

'Yessa, yessa.' The Chinaman displaying golden teeth again.

'How much does this rush?'

'One dolla fifty.'

'Okay,' said Varne stretching out on the chair. 'Chop, chop!'

The girl leaned over and put the fan down. She did not wear anything under the nylon overall.

Varne looked at her closely. 'No. The other girl,' he said.

'You likee otha gil?' asked the Chinaman.

'Yeah,' Varne said. 'The other girl.'

'Hokay,' said the Chinaman and snapped his fingers to the other girl who had gone back to her magazine. She got up smiling and went across to the chair. She was not quite so pretty as the girl with the fan, though she was still nevertheless pretty in her own way, and besides, she was missing her front teeth.

When Varne went back to the canteen everyone had moved inside off the veranda. The canteen had got very

noisy. Walters was playing the piano. He could play a piano quite well. His playing accompanied a very full-figured and mature blonde who laboured under the impression she could sing *Let's Fall in Love* as Eartha Kitt performs it. The canteen was so packed that the blonde was finished her song by the time Varne pushed his way across to the piano. Sparky saw him coming and waved. Walters got up and handed him two pints of Tiger beer from the top of the piano. 'There, Varney. They keep giving me beer. I can't look at the stuff.'

'Thanks,' said Varne.

'You been a long time,' Sparky said.

'Yeah. They take a long time over a manicure,' said Varne. Walters started playing again. He was really quite good at the piano. Varne counted five girls in the canteen. They were gathered down by the counter talking to some of the sailors. They were all English girls. He was certain they were English. There was one extremely pretty girl with very dark hair and brown eyes and wearing a black dress cut away at the shoulder. The skin on her shoulders and down her back was clear and browned deeply by the sun. She was very slim built and her dark hair very shiny, and no marks of straps showed on her sun-browned shoulders or back. He wondered where she did her sunbathing. Sparky watched her too.

'You fancy that?' Varne asked.

'Not much. I'd give a week's tot to take her out and show her that snake.'

Most of the sailors were near drunk. A number of them kept shouting for Myfanwy to perform another song. After a while the blonde left the counter and made her way through among the tables, the sailors shouting and prodding and poking her as she went past; and her acting coyly and smacking at the hands and all the while smiling. She finally made it to the piano. Walters stopped playing and got off the chair and held both hands up.

'Right!' he said. 'What's it to be, Fanny?'

Myfanwy stood leaning one elbow on top of the piano. Varne looked at her closely. It was something to do with the way she stood. Then that passed through his mind but he did not think it at all possible. Her long blonde hair was

combed tightly back from her face and tied low on her neck with a ribbon. Maybe it was not the way she stood at all, but her face. She was tall and very well built and wore her white dress tightly and the dress cut so the cleavage showed deeply between her breasts and them swelling above the neckline. He thought her about thirty-eight years old. But that was the trouble with bottle blondes, sometimes it made them appear years younger than they were, or else put years on them. Myfanwy was a bottle blonde, but he thought her around thirty-eight.

'Well?' said Walters to Myfanwy who stood posed, looking about her and smiling as perhaps the whole world was in good taste.

'*Roll Me Over*,' Myfanwy said. '*Roll Me Over*.' The sailors cheered. Walters sat down at the piano and began playing. Myfanwy moved out in front of the piano, arms raised, hips swaying to the music.

'Some bastard's wound her up and threw the key away,' said Varne, and in the same breath, 'Jesus!'

The pretty girl with the dark hair and brown eyes drank half of a pint of Tiger without stopping.

'Christ,' said Sparky. 'The only pusher besides Pompey Lil who's got an oil drum for a bladder.'

'You know what it is,' said Varne.

'What?'

'Reared on it. One of her old girl's tits was mild the other bitter.'

While they spoke a stoker pushed his way up to behind the dark girl, leaned over her, put his hand down the front of her dress and in one motion skimmed a foam rubber falsie clear down the length of the canteen. The sailors cheered and applauded. Someone picked the falsie up by the door, made a great show of biting it, then skimmed it back up the canteen. Everyone watched its flight. It landed on the top shelf behind the counter among the advertising placards. The girl stood laughing and clutching her remaining breast.

'No,' said Sparky. 'Oh, my Christ, no.'

Varne nudged Walters and when he looked up Varne put his thumb between his first two fingers. Walters grinned and nodded.

'Them all?' shouted Varne.

Walters grinned and nodded. Varne looked at Myfanwy. Walters grinned. Sparky following it all shook his head.

'Well, well,' said Varne.

'Christ!' said Sparky. 'Bloody knobhounds.'

Myfanwy finished her song and fought her way back to the counter, everyone prodding and poking her on the way. She wore white high heeled shoes and had wonderfully shaped legs. She really had wonderful legs.

'Walters!' Varne said. 'You're kidding.'

'No, I'm not,' said Walters rising and wiping sweat from his face with a handkerchief. 'I'm not having you on, Varney. I met Fanny a couple of years ago in a bar down in Silvertown.'

'Knobhounds,' said Sparky. 'Bloody knobhounds I tell you.'

'You wouldn't think it,' said Varne.

'Them all,' said Walters.

'What about them tits on Fanny. That's what I want to know,' said Sparky.

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'Look at the form.'

'Told me she takes hormones,' said Walters grinning.

A little bald sailor with a beard sat down at the piano and began playing something no one recognized. They pushed their way out to the veranda carrying their drinks with them.

'I seen plenty up in drag,' said Varne, 'but I never seen anything like that. You can usually tell.'

'There you are,' said Walters.

'I don't believe that crap about hormones anyhow,' said Varne.

'Maybe they're hermaphrodites,' said Sparky.

'Hermaphrodites my arse,' said Varne. 'They wouldn't be here.'

'Why not?' Sparky asked.

'They could fuck themselves if they were.'

'Yeah . . . I never thought about that.'

'Anyway, they're all set for tonight,' said Walters. 'The bitches. I'm going to open a bank account.'

'What you going to be saving for?' said Varne.

'Hormones.'

When the canteen patrol closed the bar everyone took their drinks out and sat on the veranda and the steps. After a while they began singing and those that way dancing.

Someone passed cigars round. The three sat deep in their chairs with their feet on the table and drank off the remaining beer, smoked the cigars, and joined the singing.

James Varne had had a little too much, and the big white moon low out over the jungle across the river kept swinging around as maybe on the end of a string. The cool breeze had died too and the night was very hot and humid. Suddenly Sparky threw his cigar over the veranda and gathered himself out of the chair.

They watched him lurch down the steps with his hand over his mouth and disappear round the end wall of the canteen.

'Here's to England's Merry Mariners,' Walters said and drank off the last of his gin. Varne put the stub of his cigar on the floor and rubbed it out with his foot. Then he finished his beer in an attempt to wash the taste of the smoke out his mouth. Most of the sailors had gone now. The others had gone too.

'You suppose Sparky's passed out?' said Varne looking at the empty chair. Walters shrugged his shoulders. 'What a night though. What a night. You know, I like it here better than Honk.'

'Too hot,' said Varne. 'Much cooler in Honk. Cheaper too. It's these snobby bastard whites. That what it is. They can stick Singapree seven miles up their arse far as I care.' Walters sat staring out at the moon. Suddenly:

'You know, Varney? You're an anarchist.'

'Anarchist?' said Varne. 'The hell's an anarchist?'

Walters stared across the table at him glassy eyed and the one ear-ring reflecting the moonlight brightly in the dark. 'Anarchist. Well . . . it's—it's . . . well it's difficult——'

'You're like a lot other people,' said Varne. 'Talk about things you know nothing about.'

'I know what I'm talking about. Walters knows,' said Walters.

'Well,' said Varne. 'What's an anarchist?'

'It's . . . it's a kind of Red. . . . Yeah, that's it. You're a Red.'

Varne nodding. 'Fancy that now. I'd never have believed it. Never read about it either. Walters, you're a marvel. There's nothing you don't know, Walters. The hell's a Red anyway?'



Walters sighing and looking at the empty glasses. 'Well a Red's . . . you know, it's. . . Listen. If I was a Red and I had fifty bucks and you had nothing, I'd give you twenty-five.' Thinking then nodding to himself. 'Yes, that's it! Everybody's got the same. That's what a Red is.'

'So now I know?'

'Yes.'

'I'm a Red.'

'Yes, you're a Red.'

'Here's to Joe,' said Varne raising his glass. 'Hell, the bastard's empty . . . let's go look for Sparky.'

Sparky lay face down in a monsoon ditch behind the canteen. They dragged him out feet first and held him up against the wall.

'Come on,' said Varne shaking him. 'You can't sleep down there. There's snakes down there.'

Sparky blinked his eyes and looked at them.

'You all right?' Walters asked.

'Me—rry Chr—ist—mas, Wal—ters.'

'Merry Christmas, Sparky.'

'Me—rry Chr—ist—mas, Varney.'

'Same to you, mate. Now come on! We got to walk all that way back to the bastard dockyard.'

Holding Sparky between them they walked round the other side of the canteen to the road that led up past the regulating office to the main gate, and to the road down to the dockyard. A crowd of sailors stood outside the canteen heads, and another under the coconut palms up the hill.

Sparky feeling better. 'They giv—ing away free boo—ze o—ver there?'

'It's the girls,' said Walters. 'They do that for the boys everytime they come up.'

'I co—uldn't fa—ce it,' said Sparky. 'Not her—moph—idites.'

'They're not hermophidites,' Walters said.

'We—ll hormones the—n,' said Sparky. 'Not to—night any—way. W—ho was the d—irty bas—tard give me th—at cigar? I b—et it was one o—f th—em horm—ones.'

They stopped while Sparky was sick.

'They'll grow good flowers next year,' said Varne watching Sparky.

Someone started shouting over amongst the palms. 'Hey! Hey, you! You who looks like a boxer—come on over.' It was the very dark one with brown eyes.

'She wants you, Varney,' said Walters.

'Come on! Please come on over!'

'Wh—at she w—ant?' asked Sparky looking the other way.

'She wants Varney,' Walters said.

'J—esus. We can't a—ll be goo—dlook—ing. C—an we?'

'Aaaawh! Dry up,' said Varne.

'You coming, handsome?' the one that way shouted.

'No!' shouted Varne. 'I'm getting married to the Red Admiral's daughter in the morning. She's thirteen. I'm not superstitious and it's a two and one.'

The one that way came out from under the palms, skipping daintily in the too tight black dress. Two sailors came behind and took the one back under the palms, and then laughing, and them all laughing.

'Come on!' said Varne. 'We got three miles safari through snake infested jungle.'

'Yes,' said Walters. 'Come on.'

'Ye—ah. Onwa—rd Christian So—ldiers.'

During the next four days the *Homage* exercised in the Malacca Straits and up as far as the Butang Islands off the Siam border. The ship worked tropical routine. It was extremely hot till about four in the afternoon, then it rained, tropical rain. Suddenly the sky would be clouded over and the sea turn grey, and the rain came down, heavy, and sheeted in the windless air; and in a few seconds the shore disappearing in the rain. Afterwards the air a little cooler, but always humid. It rained every afternoon between half-past three and four o'clock. When the rain had stopped the sky remained clouded over till late evening when the clouds

disappeared over towards Sumatra, and the moon and stars would be overhead, magnified by the humidity and seemingly low over the jungle, but all through the night the dark mass of cloud lay over Sumatra and the flicker of lightning would light the clouds and momentarily they were silver mountains in the black sky.

The *Homage* was anchored off Penang. The rain had stopped and the jungle was wet and more green-looking, and all there was to see was the wet green jungle growing down to the water and the white of the higher buildings of Penang showing through the foliage. They stood on the quarter-deck smoking and looking ashore.

'There's a liberty boat at six,' said Sparky.

'You going?'

'Don't know. Don't look much.'

'I'm not going. Had a bellyful of Swettenham.'

'Maybe you're right. We'll keep our lolly for the New Year.'

The motor boat came back from shore and tied up on the stern boom.

'Hey, Varney!' yelled the quartermaster on watch. 'Blue Tot wants you.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. In the ship's office. Wants you now.'

James Varne walked along the starboard deck and up the passage to the office. The door was open. The first lieutenant sat with his back to the door reading through papers in a cardboard folder.

'You wanted me, sir?' Varne in the doorway.

'Come in, Varne,' said the first lieutenant without looking up. 'I've been reading through some history sheets—your's was quite a surprise. I never knew you held any boxing titles. You were the Imperial Navy Boys Middle weight Champion three years running.'

'Yes, sir.' Varne warily.

The first lieutenant going on. 'Middleweight Champion of Nore Command. Then Heavyweight Champion of the Home Fleet for two years. That was last year, Varne.'

'Yes, sir.'

'The United Services Boxing Championships are being held in Hong Kong at the end of January. I've entered your

name, Varne. The Americans are using that as a Korean leave base now. They'll no doubt be well represented. Aboard here we've got nothing with experience—except you, Varne. Heavyweights are scarce anywhere and of course, to win that carries all the glamour. *Homage* could do with that glamour, Varne.'

'Sorry, sir, I finished with that '

'What do you mean, Varne? Finished,' said the first lieutenant getting to his feet.

'I just don't fight any more. I only fight for myself.'

'Rubbish! I've entered your name and you'll fight. The captain agrees.'

'No, sir.' Those very blue eyes so blue and their gaze so cutting.

'Look here, Varne! You'd be very well advised to change your mind. Some people seem to think they can do as they like—but not on this ship, Varne. You'll do as you're damn well told.'

'Nobody can order me to box.' Quietly.

'Get out, Varne!' said the first lieutenant very red. 'You're down to box. That's all, Varne!'

James Varne shrugged his shoulders but said nothing, then turned and went out. Outside it was cool and the sky overcast and the sea grey, and ashore the jungle wet and green after the rain.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon of the eve of the New Year.

'Steward! Steward! You bloody well asleep? Get me another gin and tonic!' said Wainwright sitting up in one of the easy chairs in the wardroom.

'Nother one here too—with lime,' said Parfet coming in the screen door from the fo'c'sle. 'And a Carlsberg. See that it's iced. Damn hot out there today, Edgar, what?'

'Yes, Charles,' said Wainwright. 'Too damn hot.'

'Ah, that's better,' said Parfet sitting in the chair the other side of the drinks table with its magazines and Wainwright's empty glass. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief then stroked his beard with the back of his hand.

'Going on a spree tonight, Charles?'

'Had a call from a chappie I met on the troopship coming out. The old army you know. Major in the Signals. Asked me up to the mess. Seems they're having a bit of a gin-up. Steward! Where those damn drinks?'

Huw Ling padded across the carpeted deck with the tray of drinks.

'The bloody man's half asleep today,' said Wainwright.

Huw Ling set the drinks on the table.

'Were you ashore last night, man?' Parfet asked.

'Nosi, nosi. No sho'side last night,' said the Chinese steward smiling.

'Shouldn't damn well think so either,' said Parfet. 'You've got enough kids at home.'

Huw Ling put his head to one side and frowned.

'Kids! Children! Godsake, man, you know—sprogs!' Parfet walking two fingers across the magazines on the table.

'Oh, solly, si,' Huw Ling grinned. 'Seven, si.'

Parfet laughed loudly, Wainwright grinning.

'You hear that, Edgar? Seven. He sleeps with it in, Edgar.' Both laughed loudly.

'That's all they're good for, Charles. That and running.'

'Yes, whorehouses,' Parfet said.

Both laughed. Huw Ling stood silent, head on one side.

'You can waken up and take those magazines away,' Wainwright said.

'Yes, si,' Huw Ling put the magazines in the holder on the bulkhead.

'You can wipe off the table too. There's polish on it. The whole place stinks of polish that hasn't been rubbed up.'

'Yes, si'. Polish table, si'.' Huw Ling brought a cloth from the pantry and rubbed up the polish he could not see on the table.

'Has the supper menu come up from the galley yet?' Parfet asked.

'No, si'. Not yet.'

'Any idea what we've got on?'

'I think lobesteh, si.'

'What else?'

'Polk chop. Yes, I think polk chop, si.'

'What you think about that, Edgar?'

'Shan't be aboard for supper, old man.'

'No? No, I don't think I'll be either. Steward! We shan't be aboard for supper.'

'No suppeh, si?'

Huw Ling asked.

'This is the New Year. Understand? It's New Year's Eve. You don't stay aboard for bloody pork chops on New Year's Eve.'

'That's right,' Wainwright said. 'Get me another gin.'

'Same here,' Parfet said. 'Lime in mine.'

'Yes, si'. Two gins. One lime.'

The surgeon-lieutenant entered. He wore a beard too, short at the sides and coming to a long sharp point out in front under his chin. He was slightly bow-legged and had rather long arms which he was acutely conscious of and brought them up at the elbows in an effort to make them appear of more normal length. Sailors being what sailors are called him Two Gun Tex or Harry Where's Your Horse. He was awfully sensitive about that but he took it out on the V.D. men. He kept them on the list sometimes a month after they were clear.

'How are the syph cases going, Doc?' Parfet asked. 'Any new ones?'

'No. No, not yet. I shouldn't be surprised after the New Year though. It's bad down here. That's all those idiots in the fo'c'sle do—drink and chase black women.'

'You've got to make allowances though. It's their mentality. They haven't got much up here,' said Wainwright tapping his forehead with a finger.

'Yes,' Parfet said. 'All brawn and no brain.'

'You mean like that quartermaster?' said Wainwright.

'Which one?' the surgeon asked.

'Varne,' Wainwright said. 'That great hulking brute.'

'I know the one. Finest physical specimen I ever saw.'

'Really?' Parfet said.

'Yes. If I had his body I shouldn't bother much about my brain.'

'You're joking. Surely,' said Parfet.

'No. Not at all.'

'Number One has him entered in the boxing championships,' Wainwright said. 'I saw his name on the list.'

'Is he?' said the surgeon. 'I'd like to see that. Really would.'

'We'll go along and see the fights then, Doc,' Parfet said. 'I like to see a fight. That's as long as the chaps can really fight.'

'I believe this Varne's a bit of a champion already,' said Wainwright.

'He is?' said Parfet.

'Heard Number One and the Old Man discussing him that day in Penang.'

'We'll have to see the fights then, Doc,' said Parfet.

'Yes, we'll do that.'

'Care for a short, Doc?' Parfet asked.

'Thank you. A gin, please. A tonic with it too if you don't mind.'

'Steward!' shouted Parfet. 'Three gins, a tonic, and one with lime.'

Huw Ling went for the drinks. The surgeon sat on the couch with his head back against the bulkhead, his face up to catch the draught from the electric fan swirling overhead.

'Where are you off tonight, Doc?' Wainwright asked.

'Going up to *Terror* wardroom,' the surgeon said looking into the fan. 'I know two or three fellows up there. They invited me up.'

'God. There's plenty of invitations floating around today,' said Wainwright.

'What about you, Edgar?' the surgeon said.

'I'm all set. My sister-in-law lives up-country. In the rubber business. They've got a house in town too.'

'And what has everybody else fixed up?' the surgeon asked.

Huw Ling brought the drinks and took away the empty glasses.

'Both the gunners are going into town. You know them,' Parfet said. 'They'll be chasing a couple of W.R.A.C. poppies round Tanglin Barracks I expect.'

'Number One and the chief are invited to that R.A.F. camp down-river,' said Wainwright. 'They're having a big dance. Should be quite good.'

'What about the Old Man?' asked the surgeon.

'Nothing less than the Raffles, old chap,' Parfet said.

'Lord!' said the surgeon. 'I believe you've even got to pay before you get in there.'

'Shouldn't be surprised,' said Parfet. 'Can't say I'd care for it much myself though.'

'Then that leaves Sparks, the Navvy, and the Subby aboard,' said Wainwright.

'I saw Swanson on the gangway when I came past,' said the surgeon.

'Yes, well, I mean to say, old chap. When you come to realize he was only promoted from middy three weeks ago the gangway's his place on New Year's Eve,' said Wainwright.

'Quite!' said Parfet draining his glass. 'Anyone for another short?'

'No, no. It's my turn,' said the Surgeon. 'Same again everybody?'

'Yes, the same,' Wainwright said.

'Steward!' said the surgeon. 'Same again.'

'Yes, si'. Same again, si', ' Huw Ling grinned.

'I do think someone or other from the base has invited Navvy to their place,' Parfet said.

'What about Sparks?' Wainwright asked.

'Don't give a damn about sparks, old man,' said Parfet. 'Too dry. Talks bloody shop all the while. Doesn't drink gin you know—it's amps.'

They laughed. Huw Ling brought the drinks and took away the empty glasses. Outside the sun shone hot in the cloudless blue sky; and only the Indian constables of the dockyard police were out in the hot sun.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon of the Eve of the New Year. The watchkeepers' mess was crowded. 'When's that bastard bubbly coming?' Sparky shouted.



'Crutch has gone for it,' said Varne stood in the middle of the mess in his underpants. Leading Signalman Crutch was the leading hand of the watchkeepers' mess.

'He's a long time,' Sparky said. 'He's sitting in the heads drinking it. He's a rum-rat. That's what Crutch is—a rum-rat.'

'You shouldn't say that,' Varne said. 'You should only say nice things today. Even the Old Man let us have our bubbly now instead of at midday so we can get pissed easier tonight. You should be thinking about a good word to say for him at Mass tomorrow instead of saying lousy things about Crutch.'

'Mass, my arse. I want my bubbly.'

'Never mind the bubbly,' said Varne with his cap in his hand. 'You got any blanco?'

'Never bought blanco in my life. There's some in the mess locker.' Varne went across to the locker on the bulk-head for the bottle of white blanco.

'Anybody stopping aboard for an early supper?' asked the duty cook, a telegraphist.

'What we got?' asked Varne.

'Bangers and beans or herrings-in,' said the telegraphist.

'Couldn't look a bastard bean in the face,' said Varne.

'And you know what you can do with your herrings-in?' said Sparky.

'I don't worry,' the telegraphist said. 'I'm going ashore later on.'

'You do that, mate,' said Varne. 'Have your herrings-in then go and get pissed to the gills.'

Crutch came down the ladder to the mess carrying the rum fanny.

'Where the hell you been?' said Sparky.

'There's a bloody great queue up there, opp's. And the Subby's almost pissed on the smell too.'

'Come on then,' said Varne. 'Less gab and get it dished up. There's a bus for Singapree in a little while.'

'Who said?'

'We got a call during the forenoon from *Terror* saying they're laying on a bus for us.'

'Christ! They're generous sudden like,' said Crutch. 'We'd better get mobile.'

He took the rum measure and two glasses out the locker and started dishing up the rum. 'Who's first?'

'I'll take it. I got to shave first,' Sparky said. 'Go ahead.'

'Cheers,' said Crutch and took a sipper out of the glass then passed it to Sparky. Sparky took two gulps, stopped, screwed his face, then held the glass up to the light. 'Jesus Christ, Crutch. There's hair and all sorts of muck sculling round in here.'

Crutch passed on a tot to a signalman who had just come down from the wash place with a towel wrapped round him.

'Never mind what's sculling around,' said Varne. 'Drink it through your teeth like a strainer. You can spit the shit out afterward.'

'I don't mind drinking hair really,' Sparky said. 'But I like to know where it's been.'

'Come on, drink up.'

Sparky shut his eyes, screwed his face again, and drained the glass. 'Oughf! Tastes like bilgewater.'

Crutch filled the glass again. 'Here, Varney.'

'Go ahead,' said Varne.

'Cheers,' Crutch said and took a sipper.

Varne finished it in three gulps, then spat. 'Like bark off a tree,' he said.

'Hey!' the boy Worrall said looking out the scuttle. 'The bus is out there on the jetty.'

'Christ Almighty! I haven't got time to shave now,' said Sparky.

'Never mind the shave,' said Varne. 'Put some of that foot powder on your kisser. If it doesn't hide your beard the Subby'll think you're beef.'

'Hey, Pinky!' Crutch yelled. 'You ready? See if you can find my shoes while I finish dishing up this bubbly.'

Varne got his duck trousers out his locker and pulled them on.

'Any bastard seen my whitefront?' Sparky yelled.

'Your dhobyng's still down the boiler-room,' someone said.

'Suck me!' said Sparky and dropped the foot powder and went up the ladder two steps at a time.

'You got my shoes yet, Pinky?' yelled Crutch.

'How big are they?'

'Elevens. You can't miss them. *Any More for Bubbly?*'

'Anybody seen my Pay Book?' said Varne.

'It's on the table,' said a telegraphist. 'Over by the mess iron.'

Sparky came down the ladder dressed in whitefront and underpants. Crutch was running around wearing his socks and with the rum fanny in one hand and his trousers and whitefront in the other.

Overhead the tannoy clicked as it was switched on and the bos'n's pipe shrilled: 'First liberty boat men fall in on the iron-deck.'

'Suck me!' said Crutch dropping the rum fanny on the table and pulling on his clothes.

'What about the bubbly?' asked Varne jamming his cap down over his head.

'Drink the bastard!' said Crutch. 'Nobody else wants it.'

Varne downed two tots while the mess cleared. The only sailors left were the duty signalman and the mess cook.

'Come on, Crutch!' said Varne going up the ladder. 'They've fallen in.'

Crutch looking up from tying his shoes: 'Hey, Varney! You got no socks on.'

Varne stopped half up the ladder and looked at his feet. 'That's all right. As long as I got trousers on that's all that matters.'

Varne ordered the Tigers. They sat at a table in the Other Ranks Bar in the Singapore N.A.A.F.I. Club. The bar was situated on the top floor as far from the swimming pool as the construction of the building allowed so there might be less chance of the low sailors leering in their drunkenness at the virtuous ladies of the gentlemen officers of Mighty England disporting themselves around the pool in bikinis.

'Caaaw!' Sparky said. 'You see her tits?'

'Whose tits?' said Varne finishing the first of the Tigers.

'Her that just took a header off the top board. The blonde pusher.'

From the glass door of the bar James Varne could just see the diving boards at the head of the pool.

'You should have seen her belly though,' said Smithy. 'Hanging on her like a hump on a camel.'

'You kidding?' Sparky indignant.

'No,' said Smithy. 'But she was.'

'Never mind the pushers, Sparky,' said Varne. 'It's your turn for the hooch.'

Sparky got up and went across to the bar. McLaren came in the door of the bar with two A.B.s from the after mess-deck.

'Busy on the Tiger, Varney?' he shouted.

'Yeah. You too?'

'Just getting started. They make it from onions you know.'

'Do they?' Varne said. 'I thought it was what was left in the trees after they took the rubber out.'

McLaren thoughtfully: 'Yeah. Maybe you're right.'

'Hey. Where we going to bring the New Year in?' Sparky suddenly.

'Let it walk on its own legs,' Varne said. 'We'll find someplace.'

'Have another wet,' Smithy said.

'Yeah,' said Sparky. 'It's your turn.'

'Again? Christ, we drunk that much already?'

'Hey!' said Sparky. 'Look what's come in.'

Three Imperial Army policemen stood inside the door looking around the bar. Soldiers were hastily buttoning their tunics, putting belts back on, and trying not to look as drunk as they might. The policemen walked slowly around the tables looking at everyone as they might look at lepers. It was very quiet and the blue cloud of cigarette smoke whirled around in the air currents above tables. The policemen stopped over the back of the bar by the accordion player.

'You! You playing that thing.'

'Yes,' said the soldier. 'Yes, Corporal.'

'Don't. You can't play that thing anyhow.'

'No, Corporal.'

'No.'

'No, Corporal.'

'I got a complaint. A complaint, see. About you, see. The

ladies in the N.C.O.'s lounge say you're playing lewd songs, see.'

'I wasn't, Corporal. Honest I wasn't, Corporal. I was playing *Roaming in the Gloaming*, Corporal.'

'That's lewd.'

'That's not lewd, Corporal. It's not.'

'Don't argue with me, soldier. It's got lewd words.'

'There was nobody singing, Corporal.'

'I don't give a monkey's. If the N.C.O.'s ladies say it's lewd—it's lewd.'

'Yes, Corporal.'

'If I catch you playing that thing again . . . you're up the river.'

'Yes, Corporal.'

The policemen continued round the tables then went out to report the silence of the lewd accordion player to the ladies in the N.C.O.'s lounge.

'That's a monarchy for you,' said Varne when the policemen had gone.

'Yeah. A monarchy,' said Sparky.

'You hear that crack about the lounge,' Smithy said. 'A lounge! The hell's a lounge? I always thought a boozier was a boozier.'

'Obviously you don't think enough,' said Sparky.

'No.' Smithy thoughtfully.

'Poor bastards,' said Varne. 'Who'd be a pongo?'

'Here's to them,' said Sparky. 'May their ears drop off and their noses fester.'

They drank to that with profound hope and sincere feeling.

'What'll it be?' asked Varne.

'We'll stick to 'Tiger,' Smithy said. 'Mix too much of the plonk they flog here and we might explode.'

Varne went across the bar. Everyone was shouting orders to the two Chinese behind the counter. Over the back of the bar the accordion player sat with a long face and with his accordion in its case under the table.

'Hey, John!' Varne yelled. 'Three Tigers.'

The barman looked at him, tall above the others, and at his face, then nodded. Varne watched him pull the beers, then suddenly conscious some of the shouting had stopped. He

looked with the rest of them towards the door. Two girls stood just inside the glass swing doors. Other Rank women were allowed to use the bar too but it was very rare for any to come in. One of the girls was a tall red-head with a nice figure. The other was short and dark and busty, and by the look of her she knew it too. You know how it is when women are proud of something they got. They were quite pretty, their faces, and both wore those tight Chinese frocks called cheongsams, you know, with the high stiffened neck and long-slitted skirts that let everyone see what they looked like way up there.

'Not bad,' Varne said to no one in particular.

'Best stay on the beer, whacker.' He was a little red-faced soldier with fair hair cropped short and with palm tree emblems sewn on the sleeves of his battle tunic.

'You know them?'

'Everybody knows them. Q.A.R.A.N.C. Must be taking the night off.'

'Don't they get much leave?'

'Get leave all right, whacker. But they're on the game other nights. Rich chinks and planters. They're all on the game. Anyway most of them except the ones who think they're blokes. There's a lot of them down here. Must be the sun that turns them. Christ knows why.'

'Straight.'

'Straight, whacker.'

The girls were down the end of the counter were smiling and looking around the bar.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. That red-headed pusher's not bad at all. The dark one's too short though. Looking top-heavy with all that tit too. Short ones are all right lying down, but standing up your knees go before anything else. That's the trouble with short ones. That red-head's about shoulder-high. Shoulder-high's all right. You could manage that . . . at a push. Christ, you could. Yes, sir.

Varne took the beers back to the table. Sparky was staring at the girls, elbow on the table, chin in hand, and a look of wishful thinking lighting his face.

'What you thinking about, gravel guts?' Varne asked him.

'Just thinking that dark pusher got an arse made for sitting on grass.'

'Aaaawh! I thought you were a tit-man,' Smithy said.

'What you like' then,' said Sparky, eyes still on the girls.

'Anything as long as it got hair round it.'

'All right! All right!' said Sparky. 'Don't look at the barman that way.'

'Aaaawh! Take a running jump.'

'I wouldn't mind. I wouldn't mind that at all,' Sparky looking at the girls. 'Depending on the direction.'

Everyone was pretty near drunk now. James Varne did not feel too badly. He was going to change to gin and tonic though. He had begun to get a little full up with beer. A few beers are all right but too many and you get that bloated feeling, and when you start going outside, you are going outside all night. He was at that point when you begin to forget all the things that annoy you, and all the while you are hoping someone does not spoil it by bringing up the things you just begin to forget. They do that and you feel all hellish inside again and what you drank makes you want to stand up and swing on someone. But no one said anything, and outside it very dark and the ships out in the Roads all lit up and the reflections of the lights scoring the black water under the dark sky, and still the moon not yet risen.

Suddenly: 'Hello, sailors.'

The sailors stood up as best as they were able.

'How . . . how are youse ladies?' said Sparky.

The ladies smiled. You could tell it was the first time they had been called ladies.

'Like a seat?' said Sparky. 'You sit at our table you want to.'

'No. It's all right. There's no free chairs,' the red-head said. 'We'll stand.' Afterward continuing. 'It's cool up here.'

The sailors remained standing.

'Yeah, yeah. It's cool,' Sparky said. 'Look - take my chair. And you take Smithy's. That right, Smithy?' Smithy looked fed up with the whole business. Maybe just because he was old enough to be the girl's father and that girls that young don't feel much like going to bed with a man who might put them in mind of their father. That is, girls on the whole. Though, of course, there are girls who, for a slight consideration, will go to bed with a man who might actually put them in mind of their grandfather. Some girls.

'That's so kind of you,' the red-head said and sat down.

Sparky went off to look for more chairs. Smithy stood behind the table. Where Varne sat he looked right up the red-head's skirt. It was the slits that did it. The back of the skirt dropped away when sitting down and left the legs bare to the hips. She saw him looking, and smiled, and pulled the chair further under the table.

'Like a drink?' Smithy asked.

'Thank you,' said the red-headed one. 'I'll have a horse's neck.'

'Yes,' said the dark one. 'A horse's neck too.'

Smithy seemed as if he might have forgotten how old he was and went across to the counter as Sparky came back with two wicker chairs.

'You like a drink, girls?' Sparky asked.

'Thanks but we're getting one.' The girls smiled. The red-head had a nice smile. Lots of white teeth and dimples. Smithy came back and set the horse's necks on the table. 'There's more,' he said. 'I got Tigers.'

'Not for me,' Varne said.

'Yeah, why?'

'Going on gin.'

'You got to drink it now. It's bought,' Smithy went back for the drinks.

'That's mother's ruin,' the dark one said.

'Yeah?' said Varne.

'Yes. That's what we call it at home.'

'What's home?' asked Sparky attempting to get in the conversation.

'Aberdeen,' the red-headed one said. 'We both live in Aberdeen. It's a nice place. They call it the Silver City on the Golden Sands.'

'They do?' said Varne.

'Yes,' said the dark one. 'The Silver City on the Golden Sands.'

'That's funny,' said Varne. 'I was there when I was on Fishery Protection. I never saw any gold or silver though. It rained the whole time. The bars close in the middle of the evening too. That's all we saw up there. Rain and miserable faces. The piss pot of Britain we called it.'

'I don't think so,' the dark one said.



'Don't think what?'

'I just don't think so.'

'You're entitled to your opinion,' Varne said. 'Everybody's entitled to his own opinion. I just gave you mine.'

'Humph!' she said and sat back and finished off the drink she had brought with her. She appeared quite upset with Varne's expression of opinion. She was one of those who took offence easily.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Pity the poor bastard who marries you. You'll sit on your arse all day wearing curlers and reading true romances, all the while nagging the poor bastard half to death. Yes, sir.

Smithy came back with the Tigers. 'It's twenty past nine,' he said. 'What time this place close?'

'Don't know,' said Varne. 'They'll send the heavy mob in to clear it when it gets near time.'

'We'll have to go soon,' said the red-head. 'We're going to a party.'

'You not going to stop a while?' asked Sparky.

'Only a little while. We promised we'd be there before eleven.'

'That's a long time yet,' said Sparky. 'You got an hour anyway.'

'We've got a long way to go,' the dark one said looking that way at Varne.

He ignored the remark. He felt badly though. He did not want to become involved in an argument. It was just his opinion that had upset her. He did not care about Aberdeen anyway. They could tow it out and sink it in the middle of the North Sea for all he cared, and the dark one with it. He felt that way about her too. In fact, they could both get sunk. Yes, sir. James Varne thought. White teeth and dimples and bare legs aren't everything. Not by a long bastard way. No, sir.

'Where's the party?' Sparky asked the red-headed one.

'A long way from here,' said the dark one. She was taking it out on everyone now. She sat low down in the chair looking at Sparky in that contemptuous way of hers. 'It's going to be a great party. It's out at one of the villas. My friend's in the export business. There won't be any drunk sailors there either. I'm sick of drunk sailors.'

'Oh, Rosita, be quiet,' said the red-head. 'They don't mean anything.' And to the sailors, 'Do you?'

'No, of course we don't,' said Sparky. 'We don't mean anything. Christ we don't. I'd take her out anytime. When I saw youse come in I said to——'

'That's fine!' said the dark one. 'That's just fine! You take me out?'

'Now, wait a minute,' said Sparky. 'I might not be a pig but I got forty bucks.'

She put her head back on the chair and laughed. You could see her larynx moving under the pale skin of her throat, and her breasts heaving, and the nipples showing round and hard under the tight silk of the cheongsam.

'You don't half think you're something, don't you?' she said. 'You hear him, Joyce? Forty bucks!' And to Sparky. 'Listen you! I wouldn't even stand against the wall for forty bucks.'

One of the A.B.s who came in with McLaren stood on top of the next table and the sailors in the bar were singing *This Old Hat of Mine*. Both girls watched, the dark one staring between Varne and Smithy.

'No,' said Varne. 'You wouldn't do it for forty bucks. You want one of those capitalist chinks with hundred dollar bills sewn in his shirt-tails.'

'I wouldn't let you either.'

'I don't want to.'

'You wouldn't get the opportunity. I'm particular.' All the while her watching the sailor on the table.

'Yeah,' Varne said. 'About the price.'

'Why not? I don't intend to be a nurse all my days.'

'Oh, quiet, Rosita,' the red-head said. 'Do, please.'

'Why should I? I don't care what they think. They're only sailors. I'll never see them again. I'll never see any of them again,' she said looking around the bar. 'I know what I want.'

'Yeah. We all know that. You came out here to make a fortune so you can go back to Aberdeen and marry the Mayor or the Sheriff or whatever you call him.'

The A.B. on the table was down to his trousers.

'That's a good idea. Maybe I will. Yeah, maybe I will.'

'You do it quicker you cut the price.'

Staring at the sailor on the table. 'Okay! Give me forty bucks.'

'Nothing doing. I'm not buying Aberdeen a new mayor's lady.'

'You!' she said poking Sparky. 'I'll let you have me for forty bucks. It's the New Year. We'll go outside for forty bucks.'

The A.B. was down to his underpants.

'That's right. Be a communistic whore,' Varne said. 'Take anything that's offered. Never turn an offer down. It's not mountains that shape destinies—it's grains of sand. Go ahead, Sparky. Offer her five.'

Down somewhere by the pool someone blew a whistle, the echoes carrying over the singing. A soldier by the door shouted over that a drunken sailor had just gone in the pool off the top board wearing all his clothes. The A.B. on the table took his underpants off and everyone threw beer at him.

'Let's drink,' said Varne raising his glass. 'To the next mayor's lady of Aberrrrdeen.'

Suddenly: 'You bastard!' she yelled and kicked the table over. The red-head grabbed her as she tried to kick Sparky and the bodice of the cheongsam parted down the front. She screamed and tried to hold the bodice together and kick Sparky at the same time. No one knew what Sparky had done to her and Varne standing back from the scene, his glass still in his hand, supposed that women were just made that way anyhow. At least mentally, he thought.

The A.B. was just climbing off the table when the doors crashed open and four Imperial Army policemen charged in with batons drawn. They laid about those at the counter first. Varne saw the corporal grap McLaren and smash him in the face with his baton. McLaren went down at his feet. Varne dropped his glass, grabbed a chair, and swung it at the corporal as he turned. He went down across McLaren. A glass broke on Varne's head. He spun round and saw the mayor's lady grabbing for another glass on the floor. As she stood up he put his foot in her crutch and she went back and sat down hard on the floor, breasts free of the bodice and no brassiere underneath. The policemen were still swinging their batons and everyone trying to get out the doors at

the same time. The A.B. with his clothes in his arms and the accordion player with his case taking up the rear. Varne looked around the bar. Smithy had disappeared but McLaren was on his feet, blood streaming down his face, trying to kick the corporal's head off. Then he saw Sparky leaning across the counter trying to pick a bottle off the shelf along the back. The red-head had her friend on her feet and pulling her towards the doors.

'Come on!' yelled Sparky.

Over the back of the bar two soldiers fought it out with the only policeman still on his feet.

'Come on!' yelled Sparky stuffing a bottle down his white-front. 'Come on for Jesusake!'

Varne stopped at the door, picked up a potted palm and threw it in the direction of the policeman. As they went out the doors they saw it take him in the small of the back.

They went down the stairs in flights and out through the glass doors onto the street. They made it at the same time as did the Provost Marshal and his reinforcements. About a dozen Imperial Air Force policemen were grabbing at the crowd of figures running in all directions. Across the roadway on the left was a park of some description with a cathedral in the middle of it and the cathedral floodlit, and the trees surrounding it black against the light.

'This way!' Varne yelled and set off towards the park. They were half across the roadway when a jeep screamed to a halt in their path. Varne ran to one side and Sparky the other, then the driver swung the door open and stuck his legs out. Varne went on running and carried through with a right-hander as the driver stepped clear of the door. Varne felt the impact right to his teeth. The driver went back clean off his feet and landed in front of Varne on the kerb.

They made it into the darkness of the park. No one came after them. It was very dark. All the while Varne ran he heard the beer gurgling inside of him. He could hear Sparky pounding along in front and in the midst of all the excitement he was surprised to find himself trying to remember the name of the park. He was sure it had some grand name—but there it was—he could not remember it. Suddenly he hit someone, or rather ran them down, all he felt was a light thud, a breath of garlic, followed by a surprised yelp and a

loud thud. He went on running. It was so dark he could not even see Sparky and only knew he was out front by the sound of his feet on the hard-packed grassy ground. Suddenly was a thud out front and the rumble of bodies on the ground followed by Sparky cursing. Varne slowed and out of the dark two bodies sat up and jabbered indignantly in a language he knew nothing about. He pulled Sparky to his feet a little way further on.

'You want . . . to keep that . . . lark for your . . . bed, mate,' said Sparky into the dark. They struck out across the park in the direction of the cathedral. It was certainly a fine park with a grand name—but what went on there after dark was no one's business. They crossed a roadway through the middle of the park and ran on into the trees.

High railings were around the cathedral and inside the railings on the ground were the flood lamps. They sat down by the railings behind some bushes.

'What you . . . think, Varney? We . . . make it?'

'Yeah . . . but it . . . was close.'

'Yeah. That . . . nut going . . . in off the . . . top board did it.'

'Yeah. The . . . nut.'

'What you . . . think happened . . . to those pushers?'

'Don't know. Hope they . . . get fined for . . . indecency and lose their . . . life savings.'

'Scabs!' said Sparky.

'Yeah, scabs,' said Varne.

It was very hot under the trees.

'Christ, I could . . . do with a drink. What . . . you got in that . . . bottle?'

Sparky took the bottle out his whitefront. 'Whisky . . . I think . . . or rum.'

'Hold it to the light . . . and see what the . . . label says.'

'I can't see. What you . . . think I am . . . a bloody iat?'

'Give it me.' Varne took the bottle and held it to the light thrown back off the walls of the cathedral.

'What's it say?'

'You nit! You bloody great nit!'

'Now what?'

'KWAPP'S GINGER WINE.'

'Jesus Christ I been seen off!'

They left the bottle of Kwapps six star, gold medal, three diploma Ginger Wine for the park sweeper in the morning and set off across the park to where the bright neon lights of the cinemas and shops and restaurants showed through the dark trees, and to where the noise of the traffic came.

'A hell of a way to spend New Year's Eve,' said Sparky.

'What you think we should do?'

'Start where we left off.'

'How about the U.J.C.? It's cheap. Ten cents more than the N.A.A.F.I.'

'Capitalists! Bloody capitalists! The only non-profit making service for troops that pays dividends to shareholders.'

'What's your old man—stockbroker?'

'Roadsweeper.'

'What about the Great World then?'

'That's it. Great World.'

They came out of the park onto the bright lit street and stood waiting for a taxi.

'Helloa, John! Gil? Jig jig?' said a trishaw driver.

'Piss off!' said Varne.

'Yeah. What you take us for?' said Sparky. 'Tourists?'

The trishaw driver looked hurt. 'Good gil, John.'

Varne and Sparky crossed the wide roadway between streams of traffic and stood up outside one of the better hotels of the city.

'See what I see?' said Sparky.

'What?'

'Knobhound.'

'Where?'

'Come out the hotel.'

A tall man wearing a white suit, brown and white shoes, and a wide Panama hat with a blue band, stood on the bottom step of the hotel looking their way.

'What about him?' said Varne.

'Let's take him in the park and bounce him.'

'Come off it. We been in enough trouble tonight. Besides he's may be Special Duty.'

'Whoever saw a bull who was a knobhound?'

'I have. They're everywhere. That's what caused the last

war. The knobhounds in the governments fighting over the athletes in the Olympic Games.'

'Who told you that?'

'Myself. I'm a historian too.'

A motor taxi stopped. 'Where you go, John?'

'Great World. As the crow flies,' said Varne.

'Yessa. Chop, chop. Me savvy.'

Varne climbed aboard the taxi. Sparky stood looking back at the hotel.

'Come on,' Varne said. 'He's got the meter down.'

'What about him?' Sparky nodding towards the hotel.

'Let him wave his wand.'

Sparky shrugged his shoulders and climbed aboard. 'That was a real money-bags knobber that was.'

They were driving down the roadway, the lights in the shop windows bright but not many people about on the pavements.

Suddenly: 'You see who just gone past?' Sparky asked.

'Didn't see anybody in particular.'

'It was Worrall. I'm sure it was.'

'I'd forgot about him. Haven't seen him all night.'

'He's probably been in the U.J.C.'

'Been to the pictures more like it. The kid don't drink.'

'Wish I'd gone to the pictures when I was an O.D.'

'You never had the sense,' said Varne.

'I suppose you had?'

'It wasn't that. I just didn't like dark places all by myself. How much money we got left?'

Sparky dug into the pocket of his trousers and brought out his paybook.

'Thirty bucks.'

'You're baronial. I got seventeen.'

The taxi had slowed. There was much traffic after they turned away from the seafront.

'What's he doing--pedalling?' said Sparky and tapped the back of the driver's head with his fist. 'Chop, chop, John!'

The driver turned and grinned, 'Me savvy. Hokay.' He turned back to driving just in time to miss a bus and two trishaws.

'See that? See that?' said Sparky. 'This bastard'll have us all boxed.'

Outside it was close and sticky after the cool conditioned air of the cinema and the dark across the park and out towards the seafront forbidding after the friendly rain-soaked streets of the London of the film . . . yes . . . and I've only twice passed through London and I don't know anything about it and I'd probably get lost if I was there. . . . But London seemed awfully friendly sitting there in the cool dark after this place . . . damn place . . . and it the New Year too . . . that makes it worse . . . damn bloody Singapore . . . and it the New Year too . . . New Year . . . and home away away . . . and Mum and Mary at home thinking about me . . . I think about them . . . I can see them if I close my eyes . . . I love them . . . I love them . . . I love Mary . . . I love you . . . so far away . . . I love you . . . bloody place this . . . and nobody to speak to because I'm only a bloody sailor and the only people who talk to sailors are other sailors you see all day and all night and them talking that way . . . they talk without feeling . . . I want something better than that . . . I love them . . . I love you . . . I love Mary . . . Oh I love you . . . losing sight of those damn bloody lights like that and them burning and stinging that way . . . funny they sting when you cry . . . mustn't cry . . . I know I cry . . . mustn't cry . . . I'll cry when it's dark and alone . . . I know I cry . . . them so far away . . . I love them. . . . Oh I love them . . . don't let me cry . . . please don't . . . Varney doesn't cry . . . why, God, why . . . why can't I be like Varney . . . Varney so big and not afraid and talking that way and the way he stands and looks at people right in the face when he speaks and so confident and standing that way with his legs apart and so tall and so big and his chest that way when he stands and those arms and neck and blond hair and his broken nose and those blue eyes . . . those awful blue eyes looking people in the face and the people always turning away . . . why, God, why couldn't I be like that . . . and the stinging again . . . I don't care if I cry . . . I don't bloody care . . . I can cry if I want . . . I'm not frightened to cry



. . . and that *smart* Englishman with his *smart* clothes standing on the steps looking at me and thinking I'm just another bloody sailor . . . bastard . . . *smart* bastard . . . smiling that way . . . if it was Varney he'd look at him with those eyes and hit him so hard he'd never smile again . . . Christ he wouldn't. The boy walked on.

'Sailor! Excuse me.'

The boy turned.

'Excuse me.' The man smiling politely.

'What do you want?' said the boy hoping the tears did not show.

'I . . . Oh, I'm a little lost,' the man said.

The boy looked at him. He was older than he had thought. He *was* smiling—smiling—not grinning. No, not grinning.

'I don't think I could help you, mister. I don't know this place.'

'Then that makes two of us. What?' He smiled. A broad smile. He looked quite jolly. Maybe he had not been thinking anything about bloody sailors after all. He did not look as though he had thought anything like that at all. He smelled of cigar smoke. He looked very jolly.

'Where is it you want, mister?' the boy asked.

'Well, to tell the truth—I don't quite know. I just flew in here today. I thought I might find somewhere to have a quiet drink to celebrate the New Year. You know—somewhere rather nice.'

'I don't know any place like that, mister,' said the boy looking up and down the street. 'We just go to the U.J.C. or the N.A.A.F.I.'

'I thought that would be rather boring for sailors. I always thought they went for the more exciting places.'

'Things cost too much down here. There's a lot of snobs too,' said the boy more relaxed now.

'Really,' the man said with indignation. 'I never knew that, old boy.'

'Oh, everybody knows that.'

The man was smiling again. He seemed awfully understanding. Most Europeans would not have spoken to a sailor whether they were lost or not.

'I'm very bloody-minded about people like that.'

'You are?'

'Yes. Certainly. I think English sailors are the best in the world. I should be extremely offended and annoyed if someone snubbed an English sailor in my presence.'

'Yes,' said the boy.

'Certainly,' the man said. 'I should feel absolutely bloody about it. I'm right on your side, believe me.'

The boy looked up into his face. The man smiled. The boy smiled.

'Tell you what,' the man said. 'That's if you're not offended.'

'I'm not offended at all,' said the boy.

'Grand! That's grand! Really . . . I'd like to invite you along for a little drink somewhere nice and quiet. Would you?' The man smiling.

The boy quiet and looking down the street at the neon lights of the cinema on the corner overlooking the park, the lights red, and going out, then on again brightly green. 'Well, I don't know.' The boy still looking at the lights.

The man smiling. 'Now don't tell me you're not going to allow me the privilege of redeeming the civilians' prestige to the English sailor.'

'No, it isn't that,' said the boy slowly. 'You'll probably laugh, mister, but I don't drink much.'

'I shouldn't laugh at all. I don't believe in people drinking too much either. But I thought tonight would be a little special. After all, it is an occasion— isn't it?'

'I suppose you could say that.'

'There you are. Now what about accepting my invitation?'

The boy smiled.

'Of course you do,' said the man. 'I should be awfully offended if you didn't. Come along. And cheer up. I want to see you smile. Look, here's a taxi. *Hey, taxi! Taxi!*'

They came back onto the street outside the gates of the Great World. James Varne felt pretty tight. The street was

busy and traffic roaring past and the air thick with exhaust smoke, and the smell of fruit and fish and cooking rice altogether with the smells of the people passing on the pavements.

'Christ, I feel half canned,' said Varne.

'Yeah? I think my head's on ball bearings. Come on, let's whip it up. It's almost midnight.'

Varne stopped and looked around the street. 'Across the street,' he said. 'By that lantern shop. The Bamboo Oasis. What you think?'

'Come on.'

It took them some time to cross the street. A number of soldiers were in the bar. The Oasis was one of those open-front bars with a few wicker tables scattered about the floor and a stack of bamboo stools back against the far wall. Sparky ordered two Tiger beers. Some Chinese girls sat at the tables with the soldiers. The two sailors carried their beer across and lifted two stools down and sat at one of the tables at the back of the bar.

'Helluva cheerful place. Noisiest boozier I ever been in,' said Sparky loudly. 'Cheers.'

Varne drank too. The beer was warm.

'Marvellous place. Great,' said Varne.

Some of the soldiers looked mournfully across at them from the other tables. They were quite young—about eighteen or nineteen. The Chinese sat with them did not look like girls at all but old women, old enough to be the soldiers' mothers. Also they were thin, and not at all what you would sit with if you could sit with anything else.

'Great floorshow,' said Varne.

'Bloody great floorshow,' said Sparky.

'I just said that. Isn't it?'

The Chinese barman looked across at them puzzled. The floorshow was a rubber company's calendar on the back wall. It was the old year's calendar. It was a picture of two Chinese girls standing naked side by side in a pool with yellow water-lilies floating in the water and hiding the most interesting part of the picture.

'How's the funds standing up?' asked Sparky.

Varne took the money out of his pocket. 'Seven bucks, sixty.'

'I got nineteen. We're loaded.'

'Cheers,' said Varne. They drank. The warm beer was getting warmer.

'Hey!' The soldiers turned in their chairs.

'Does your mothers know you're out with your grand-fathers?' said Sparky.

'Whatta matta you?' said one of the women. 'You talkee plenty. You mouth too big.'

'Yeah,' said Sparky. 'I know the biggest thing you got too.'

'I no talkee you.'

'No. We got nothing in common.'

*'There yuh, sailah!'*

They all looked at the two women at the counter. One was a mulatto. She wore a mauve blouse and a white skirt. The other was a black, woolly-headed negress. She was very tall for a woman. Almost as tall as James Varne, maybe even taller, large too. She looked the feminine equivalent of Black Butcher Johnson. She wore a black and white striped dress and put Varne in mind of a row of bars on a prison cage.

'She's on a world wrestling tour,' said Sparky behind his hand.

'What yuh buys drinkin?'' she asked.

'You what?' said Sparky.

'Will yuh drink with us? Yuh drink with niggers?'

'We'll drink with you,' Varne said. 'We'll drink with anybody—red, green, yellow, blue or black. We'll drink with anybody. That right, Sparks?'

'That's right. But it's no guarantee anybody would drink with us.'

'Yuh hear thaat?' said the negress to the barman. 'Them sailahs is drinkin' with us. Four beers. Beer okay with yuh, sailah?'

'Sure,' said Varne and went for two more stools.

'Jesus,' said Sparky behind his hand. 'I never seen anything like it.'

'No,' said Varne. 'Me neither.'

'If she's not a wrestler she's one of the guards out Changi Gaol.'

The women brought the beers across. 'Pleased tuh

meetcha,' said the negress. 'Goddamn place this. Nobuddy drinks with niggèrs in this goddamn place. Goddamn town of goddamn burns. That so, Anna?' She was all teeth and lips.

'Yeah,' said the one Anna. 'Thaat's so, Ethel.'

'This is Annabelle Dressinger, buys. Me. Ah'm Ethel Merryweather. Ain't thaat somethin' now?'

'What you doing in Singapree?' Sparky asked. 'You on the general's staff Land Forces Far East?'

'Hell no!' said the negress. 'We're stewardesses off one of the *Presidents*.'

'How long you ashore for?' Varne asked.

'Today and tomorrow,' said the mulatto. 'We got a room at a downtown hotel!' She was not pretty but had a manner that made Varne want to smile and be nice to her.

'Yuh buys stoppin' anyplace?' asked the negress.

'We stop where we fall over,' said Sparky.

'This place is tuh goddamn quiet.' She lifted her bag off the floor onto the table and got out a bottle of whisky. 'Yuh drink this? Good stuff. We brought it ashore.'

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'We drink anything anywhere with anybody.'

She poured whisky into the glasses of beer. It did not mix well. James Varne thought it tasted like something windows are cleaned with.

'Yuh buys ain't goin' tuh stop here all night?'

'Not all night,' said Varne. 'We'll go someplace else later.'

'Yuh come with us,' said the negress getting to her feet. 'Yuh come right along with us. Yuh hear?'

'What you got in mind?' asked Sparky.

'Our hotel. Hell a'mighty if they take niggers they ain't gonna mind who the hell we have as guests.' Her mind was made up. She put the bottle back in her bag and stood waiting for them, eyes rolling and teeth gleaming in the lamp-light.

'What about these?' said Sparky nodding at the drinks.

'Tuh hell with them. We'll get more.'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. The matelot who walks out a boozier and leaves his drink behind hasn't been born yet, and furthermore, I don't see any likelihood of the poor bastard ever being born. Feel sick as hell too. But Christ, when you're threequarters drunk you don't worry about

being a little sick. Them niggers are pissed too. But Christ, when you're threequarters drunk what you care what colour a woman is . . . I mean, what does a matelot care what colour a woman is whether he's drunk or sober . . . I mean. . . . Hell, you know what I mean. Yes, sir.

The party had been fine—grand to a point, but after eleven it had begun to get a little tiresome. That was when everyone had had just that much more than enough to drink themselves into thinking they were such grand and successful people and wanting to tell everyone about it.

It would have been all right if you had been a captain—or even a commander—but people were not so impressed with a flag-lieutenant. Kay had introduced him as a flag-lieutenant. Some of them had spoken with a trace of condescension in their voices. They were nothing anyway. A bunch of damn conceited make-believers who bossed a heap of illiterate chinks around. They were nothing at all. Damn the lot. He finished his martini and went and got his hat off the stand in the hall. The Chinese band played *China Night*. They had played it five times during the evening. He had counted them. That was all they could play well. Damn *China Night*.

'Edgar! Edgar!'

Kay just had to see you leave. He waited for her. She was smiling. She smiled all the while. It was a sort of disfigurement. Smiling with her face that way. Silly old cow. There had been more men through her than buses through the Blackwall Tunnel. The silly old cow. Not old really—just a silly cow. You hear that, Kay? A cow. Cow Kay's a cow.

'Kay. Kay I . . . I feel a little off colour. It's this heat, Kay,' he said smiling. 'I thought I might have a walk around outside. It'll be quite cool out now.'

'Oh, that's *such* a pity. I'm *so* sorry. It's only *gone* one o'clock. I thought *maybe* you'd care for a little cold turkey and salad. The refreshment *has* been mostly liquid I'm afraid.' She always spoke that way. Always smiled too. Kay's a cow.

'No. No thanks, Kay. Really. Later maybe.' Kay's a cow.

'Yes, *of course*, Edgar darling. But are you *sure* you wouldn't rather sit out on the veranda? You meet so many *dreadful* people on the streets.'

Edgar smiling. 'I think I'll be all right, Kay.'

'*Of course*. Of course, Edgar. How *silly* of me. You a sailor *too*.'

'I'll see you when I get back, Kay. I shan't be long,' he said. You cow. Silly cow.

'I'll have the *boy* make ready a salad, Edgar. Bye.'

'Bye, Kay.' Kay's a fat-arsed cow.

Outside it was cool. Cool and quiet and the crickets in the night in the grass. No damn windbags. No Kay. Thank Christ for that. Not very bright Kay. Like her sister. Still, what can you expect from a family like that. Daddy the branch manager of a building society. Of course you tried to improve Alice but it was not much success. They could talk for hours about nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. Bitches. Silly bitches. Still, two and a half years away from Alice. . . . She might even improve during that . . . providing, of course, she gave up all that silly dramatic nonsense. Stupid plays with stupid people in stupid church halls. Can't understand reality. Can't understand anything. The whole family a family of idiots. Kay's a cow and Alice without the sense to be a cow. Still, she was pretty. That pretty that no one would ever guess. Not with Alice as pretty as that. But only when you're away was it possible. Then you had to be discreet. You couldn't have anybody knowing. Word would soon get round and when anything like that happened it went on and on and anybody might hear. Not to say they would believe it. But a thing like that had a way of making the unbelieving believe. You knew that. It had happened before. No. It was not even easy when away.

A taxi came down the street. He walked to the edge of the pavement and waved. The driver saw him and swung

over to the other side of the street and came back round in a tight u-turn.

'Yessa?'

'Can you take me down the front?'

'Yessa.'

'The picture house. You know the one? I don't know the name. By the park.'

'Yessa. Savvy.'

He settled back in the seat and lit a cigarette. Out there among the villas it was very quiet, dark, and dark-green, and the dark sky clear and stars up there shimmering and changing colour, and the motion of the taxi on the smooth straight road and the dark trees with broad drooping fronds whipping past in the night and the hill and the moon now in view through the window and in front through the wind-screen the lights of the city and the cool damp of the air and the smell of old leather and the sweet taste of Virginian tobacco.

Down on the front it was cool and dark and pleasant with the water lapping against the pilings below in the dark. With his back on the rail towards the Roads he looked back at the floodlit cathedral in the dark of the park, and beyond, through the trees, the bright neon lights of cinemas and shops and the restaurants; the lights many coloured and beautiful in the dark in the night.

Afterward he put his hat back on and walked slowly, hands in pockets, towards the city. By the time he arrived back at Harold and Kay's villa some of the windbags would have left. His pace quickened. No one would be about by himself tonight. Chinese might be all right for some people but they always brought him to thinking of hot water and soap when he tried to think of other things.

He walked on down towards the N.A.A.F.I. Club. Across in the park it very dark and the floodlit cathedral tall and white among the dark trees. The city was quiet. No one about on the streets. The taxis and rickshaw and trishaw boys had moved back up the city with the closing of the N.A.A.F.I. and U.J.C. Clubs. He crossed the street and walked back towards the cinema, dark except for the neon sign. No one about. All in the Lavender Street whorehouses. Five dollars a short time and fifteen all night. He stopped and



lit a cigarette, then walked on. He turned the corner onto the tree shaded avenue leading up into the heart of the city. The soldier sat on the edge of the kerb, head between his knees and hands over the back of his neck. He stopped, pulled on the cigarette and looked up and down the avenue.

'Soldier,' he said and touched his shoulder. 'You shouldn't sit there, soldier.'

The soldier groaned then looked up at him bleary-eyed and rubbed a hand over his face.

'You shouldn't sit there you know.'

'Whit's it got t'dae wi' ye?' The soldier not moving.

'Nothing,' he said, a little uncertain. 'Nothing at all. But the patrols.'

'I suppose ye're goin' t' get me lifted,' the soldier said. 'Ye're an officer. Aren't ye?'

'No. No, I'm off one of those out there,' he said motioning a hand towards the Roads.

'I wish I wis in the bliddy Merchant Navy,' the soldier said. 'Ye goin' back t' U.K.?''

'Afraid not. We're going to Australia. We sail in the morning . . . but anyway you can't sit there. Somebody's going to run you in.'

'I couldna bliddy care less,' the soldier said and put his head back between his knees.

'Do you feel that bad?'

'Bad? Christ I'll say.'

Wainwright dropped his cigarette on the pavement and rubbed it out with his foot then looked up and down the avenue. 'You ought to try walking it off. Find a bar and have an iced beer.'

'I hivna got a bliddy light.'

Wainwright regarded the avenue again, quiet, and the trees dark shadowed out in the roadway with the street lights high and green-looking behind them. 'Come on. I'll buy you a beer. I'm just passing the time till I go back aboard in the morning.'

'Ye mean that?' the soldier said looking up at him.

'Of course. Come on. Afterward you'll feel better.'

'Okay,' the soldier said getting to his feet. 'I'm wi ye.'

'It's been a memorable New Year.'

'It's been mar—vellous. I never tho—ught I'd have a New Y—ear like thi—s.' The boy was very drunk. It was nice to be very drunk. It was nice getting very drunk. The drinks were very pleasant. The drunkenness had come slowly. It was nice drinking the pleasant drinks and the drunkenness coming that way, slowly. They had drunk three bottles of wine. It was excellent wine. Mr. Simms said it was excellent wine. Mr. Simms knew about wine. He knew about everything. Mr. Simms was very nice.

'I like this hotel very much,' said Mr. Simms.

'You be—lieve me now? You see h—ow it is? Th—ey weren't go—ing to let me in be—cause I'm a sail—or. You be—lieve me n—ow? They weren't go—ing to let me in t—ill you sa—id I was y—our nephew.'

'Not at all. Why shouldn't they have believed me? It's quite possible you were my nephew. It would be grand if you were my nephew. Have another drink. It's very nice.'

'I th—ink I've had eno—ugh. Everyth—ing's going ro—und.'

'Nonsense. You must finish this.' He emptied the bottle in the boy's glass then lit another cigar after trimming and punching it. To the boy the smoke smelled wonderful and he thought of faraway places he had never seen. Just on cigar smoke. It was really wonderful all the places he could see just closing his eyes and smelling the smoke. Everything went round. He had to stare very hard at the wall or the pattern on the carpet or the flowers in the bowl on the table before everything stopped going round.

The boy laughed. 'It's fun—ny you liv—ing in Hong K—ong.'

'It is rather. Remember—you'll have to call me when you come into harbour. When you've some time off. I'll come down and collect you. You'll like the house. It's a lovely house. Right up on the Peak.'

The boy nodded. Everything went round faster and faster.

'Anything wrong?' asked Mr. Simms.

'I fe—el bad. Oh, I d—o, I do.'

'You shan't be sick. I'm sure you shan't be sick. I suppose we really shouldn't have had that last bottle. But it's been such a wonderful evening. Perhaps it would be better if you lay down for a little.'

'I don't kn—ow. Everyth—ing's go—ing round.'

'I think it would be better if you lay down. I'll see if they've got a spare room.'

'But I've g—ot to g—et back ab—oard.'

'You shan't be late. I'll see you shan't be late.'

The negress stood by the bathroom door and undressed. In her nakedness she appeared bigger. Her long heavy limbs were smooth and black and round and a sheen on the black flesh in the light. She began to sing *Anchors Aweigh* and dance around the bed, huge breasts bouncing on her chest and her face all eyes and teeth. Sparky sat on the end of the bed with his arm round the mulatto's waist. The mulatto naked except for the pink spread off the bed round her shoulders. James Varne lay across the head of the bed with his face in a pillow and the drinks on the table by the bed.

The negress stopped dancing, her breathing heavy and her breasts shining under the light as they rose and fell. James Varne looked up at her. She smelled faintly of violets. She took a drink off the table. 'Here's tuh th' English sailahs,' she said raising her glass.

'*Yahoooooooo!*' Sparky yelled. Everyone drank.

'Here's to America's finest stewardesses, Varne said.

'Yuh're a goddamn buy yuh are.'

'Here's to the President,' Sparky said. 'The biggest blackest nigger in Yankland.'

'Yuh damn right, sailah!'

'Here's tuh all free-trading sailahs,' the mulatto said.

'Here's to Louisiana,' Varne said. 'The most democratic state in Yankland.'

'Here's to all the niggers in the Senate,' Sparky said.

'Here's tuh Queen Victoria,' said the negress.  
'Jesus. She's dead,' Sparky said.  
'Th' hell do it matter?'  
'Here's to Marx McCarthy,' Varne said.  
'Free England,' the mulatto said.  
'No,' Varne said. 'I don't drink to that. I'm an anarchist.'  
'An anarchist? Th' hell's thaat?' asked the negress.  
'You don't know what an anarchist is?' Varne asked.  
'Nope. Tell me.'  
'It's a Red. You don't know that? A fellow who knows all about it told me. Said I was a Red. Know what a Red is?'  
'No,' said the negress. 'Th' hell's a Red?'  
'Well if I got fifty bucks and you got nothing—I give you twenty-five. Easy as that.'  
'Goddamn! Thaats somethin' now. Ain't it?'  
'That's why they're fighting in Korea—to stop one half the world taking what's theirs but what the other half say they can't have. It's simple. I'm a political scientist too.'  
The negress thoughtfully. 'Then we'se Reds tuh. We're all goddamn Reds. But tuh hell with drinkin'. Let all us Reds get tuh bed. Us black Reds and yuh white Reds.'  
'Yeah,' Varne said. 'We're all brothers. The hell with the Klan.'

'They only had the one room. I hope you don't mind awfully much?'

'I don't mi—nd. Why d—oes everyth—ing keep swing—ing round to the lef—t?'

The man laughed. 'I'm sure I don't know. But you'll feel better once we get you to bed.' He turned the bedclothes back while the boy struggled out of his whitefront.

'I'm going to be si—ck,' said the boy.

'Once you get to bed you'll be all right. Come along. Don't think about it. Think about something else. Think about your girl. I'm sure you've got a girl.'

'Mary.'

'Think about Mary then.'

'She's a ni—ce girl Ma—ry.'

'I'm sure she is.'

The boy lay down on the bed very slowly then suddenly sat up.

'What is it? What's wrong?'

'It's wor—se. Everyth—ing's going ro—und an—d round.'

'You'll feel fine in a minute. Fine. Now what time have you got to be back to your ship?'

'Se—ven,' said the boy lying down slowly again.

'I'll arrange a call for five then. We'll have breakfast sent up too. Then I'll get a taxi to take you back to your ship. How's that?' he said smiling.

'Yes. Th—ey won't for—get?' said the boy smiling and his eyes closed.

'They won't forget. Do you feel any better?'

The boy nodded, smiling.

'Good. What are you smiling about?'

'Mary.'

'That's right. Think about Mary.'

'Mary.'

'Yes. Mary. Mary. Mary. Yes think about Mary. Just think about her. Mary. Mary. Mary. Mary. Mary.'

'She's ni—ce.'

'Yes. She's nice. Mary's nice. She's a nice girl. Don't go to sleep. Think about her. Think about Mary. Mary. Mary. Mary.'

'Y—es.'

'Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Mary. Mary. Mary.'

'Mary. Mary. Mary. Mary.'

'Just think about her.'

'I lo—ve her. I love Ma—ry. Love. Love. Love. Love her. I lo—ve Mary. Mary. Ma—ry. Mary. Mary.'

'Love her. Love her.'

'I lo—ve her. Love. Lo—ve. Love. Lo—ve.'

'That's right. Right. Right. Right.'

'Everyth—ing's going ro—und and round an—d ro—und and round. Ro—und. Round. Round.'

'Don't sleep. Think about Mary.'

'Ma—ry.'

'Mary. Yes, Mary.'

They came out Hoo Li Chang's beer bar downtown of the park.

'How do you feel now, Robert?'

'A bit better, thanks.'

'A hair of the dog and all that you know.'

'Aye,' the one Robert said. 'That wis no a bad thing at all in there. The one wearin' th' yellow frock. Ye no fancy her?'

'I don't care for them out here. Go with one and you're living in dread for weeks later. I've seen official photographs of cases.'

'Jist shows ye, eh?'

'Where are you going now?'

'Dinna know. Nae use goin' back t' the barracks jist now t' turn in jist t' turn oot again right away. I'll get back at breakfast time.'

'Let's walk across the park. It's cooler now. A breeze coming off the Roads.'

'Aye, please yersel.'

They walked across the grass in the park, the moon out above the Roads and everything silvered in the light and the trees tall and their shadows black upon the grass. They walked across the park towards the cathedral.

'Lovely, isn't it? So quiet.'

'Change frae th' bliddy daytime wi' all they filthy wogs rinnin' about.'

Under the trees by the cathedral it was very dark and the light thrown back off the walls came through the trees and lay in pools in the shadows.

'Cigarette?'

'I widna mind. I hiv nothin' jist now but maybe I'll see ye again next time yer ship comes in.'

'Yes. Yes, we come in here quite often, Robert.'

'Whit line are ye wi'?'

'The P. and O. Going to have a seat?'

'Here.'

'Well—yes.'

'If ye wint. It's a bit dark.'

The time was eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the first day of January. It had taken James Varne and Sparky Parker three hours to walk from Singapore to the Imperial Navy Dockyard.

'What you think we'll get?' Sparky asked as they walked through the dockyard.

'Two days pay—two days leave. Or a week's stoppage. Nothing more. We're not far adrift,' said Varne. 'I'm gasping for a wet.'

They walked on through the shimmering heat and up the brow, the quartermaster watching them from topside. Amidships the engine-room hatches were open and hot air beat out smelling of asbestos and damp and oil.

*'You two!'*

They looked along the deck towards the fo'c'sle. The chief petty officer cox'n came out of the flat onto the iron-deck.

'Yeah?' said Sparky. 'You mean us?'

'Who you think I mean?'

'Thought you were yelling at a couple chinks up in Honk,' said Varne.

'Funny, Varne. Very funny. You're adrift off leave you——'

'No kidding,' said Varne.

'I've been waiting for you to step out of line. I was told to watch you. And now——'

'Don't tempt me, Onion Bonce.'

'What you mean?'

'I'll boot your arse half-way across the dock.'

'You're on another charge, Varne. Threatening a superior officer.'

'Suck back.'

'I've got witnesses to what you said.'

'Who?'

'Parker and the quartermaster.'

'They didn't hear anything.'

'Of course they——'

'They didn't hear anything.'

'I never heard anything,' said Sparky pleased with himself. 'Shurrrup!' yelled Onion Bonce. 'Stay here till I get the officer of the day.'

James Varne went for'ard to the canteen flat for a drink of iced water. When he got back amidships Sub-Lieutenant Swanson was there with a telescope under his arm.

'Seen the signal?' asked Varne.

'Shurrrup,' said Onion Bonce.

'Bollocks.'

Sub-Lieutenant Swanson coughed. Onion Bonce tugged at the seat of his trousers. 'Where you been, Varne?'

'A drink.'

'Who said you could go for a drink?'

'Who said I couldn't?'

'*Shurrrup!* Stand over there.'

James Varne stood by the quartermaster's desk.

'Able Seaman Varne, tenshunnn! Double march!' shouted Onion Bonce. 'Halt! Off cap! Able Seaman Varne, sirrr.'

'What's the charge, Cox'n?' asked Sub-Lieutenant Swanson.

'Did remain ashore over leave three hours twenty-seven minutes, sirrr.'

'Terrible! Terrible!'

'Yes, sirrr. That's what I think, sirrr.'

'First lieutenant's report, Cox'n.'

'Able Seaman Varne, First lieutenant's report! On cap! About turn! Double march!'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. I don't know where you're expected to double on this bucket, but there you are. If it was good enough in Nelson's day it's good enough today. Yes, sir. Three cheers for Nelson—dead but never buried. Yes, sir.

'Don't go away, Varne,' shouted the cox'n. 'The first lieutenant's taking defaulters on the fo'c'sle in five minutes' time.'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. There's nothing like organization. No, sir.

There were ten defaulters on the fo'c'sle when Varne joined them. Seven sailors and three stokers. One stoker and two sailors were charged with being drunk. The rest had overstayed leave. Two sailors set up a folding desk abreast of



'A' gun and the navigator and the first lieutenant came out of the wardroom onto the fo'c'sle.

'Defaulters, Tenshunnnn!' shouted the cox'n and saluted the first lieutenant. 'Defaulters all present and correct, sirrr.'

'Carry on, Cox'n,' said the first lieutenant.

'Yes, sirrr. Stoker Mechanic Higgins, tenshunnn! Double march!'

Stoker Mechanic Higgins took one step forward, put his foot down the starboard hawse pipe, fell flat on his face and broke his leg. That held the legal proceedings up. The defaulters had to wait ten minutes before the surgeon and the sick berth attendant put in an appearance. Then as Stoker Mechanic Higgins went past the desk on a stretcher carried by two of the fo'c'sle hands, Blue Tot the Pirate leaned forward and pronounced sentence of: 'Two days stoppage of pay and one week's stoppage of leave.'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. We must utilise the short time we have here on earth. Yes, sir.

'Able Seaman Varne, tenshunnn! Double march! Halt! Off cap! Able Seaman Varne, sirrr!'

'What's the charge, Cox'n?' asked Blue Tot the Pirate.

'Did remain ashore over leave three hours twenty-seven minutes, sirrr.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes, sirrr. That's what I—I mean——'

'Yes, Cox'n. I know what you mean. Any excuse, Varne?'

'Missed the bus, sir.'

'Ah—while I remember, Varne. Have you changed your mind about the boxing championships?'

'No, sir.'

'Pity—captain's report.'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Such is justice. Yes, sir.

'Captain's report,' said Onion Bonce. 'On cap! About turn! Double march!'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. God help Nelson if I ever set eyes on him. Yes, sir.

'*Varne!*' shouted Onion Bonce. 'Don't go away! Captain's defaulters will be held on the fo'c'sle in five minutes' time.'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. That's organization for you. Yes, sir.

The Prince of Golder's Green joined Blue Tot the Pirate

on the fo'c'sle, resplendent in starched white uniform and gold braid, and with scented handkerchief over his nose so he might not suffer the stench of low sailors in his nostrils. James Varne was the captain's only defaulter. James Varne the ring-leader. James Varne the anarchist. James Varne the Red.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. It's only a matter of common sense.

'Able Seaman Varne, tenshunnn! Double march! Halt! Off cap! Able Seaman Varne, sirrr,' said Onion Bonce.

'What's the charge, Cox'n?' asked the Prince of Golder's Green.

'Did remain ashore over leave three hours twenty-seven minutes, sirrr.'

'Tystch, tystch, tystch.'

'Yes, sirrr. That's what I——'

'Yes, Cox'n.'

'Have you anything to say on Varne's behalf?' asked the Prince of Blue Tot the Pirate.

'He prefers to do his brawling in the bars ashore to boxing in the championships, sirrr.'

'Tystch, tystch, tystch. Has the man anything to say for himself, Cox'n?'

'You anything to say, Varne?' asked the cox'n.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. It's a very delicate situation. Takes some delicate thinking. Yes, sir. If I don't say anything I get charged with dumb insolence. If I say too much I get charged with gross impertinence. Yes, sir. Very delicate.

'I missed the bus, sir,' said Varne.

'Tystch, tystch, tystch,' said the Prince of Golder's Green. 'Fourteen days stoppage of pay. Fourteen days stoppage of leave. Carry on, Cox'n.'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. There's not another bucket in the whole Imperial Navy as highly organized as this. No, sir.

'On cap! About turn! Double march!' shouted Onion Bonce.

Varne doubled around the port side of 'A' gun and waited.

No, sir. James Varne thought. The cox'n is not going to shout for me not to go away. No, sir. It seems God is not holding defaulters on the fo'c'sle this first day of January. No, sir.

After captain's defaulters James Varne went down to the mess. The cooks had brought dinner down from the galley and Crutch was measuring out the rum. Sparky saw him come down the ladder. 'Christ, they went up in the air over you.'

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'Fourteen and fourteen. The bastards.'

'There's a right old how do you do anyway,' said Crutch. 'Don't you know?'

'Know what?'

'The civvy police were aboard this morning. They got Wainwright.'

'And McLaren. Tell him about Mac, Crutch,' said a telegraphist.

'Were you in the Club last night, Varney?' asked Crutch.

'Yeah. There was a punch up.'

'They got Mac for assaulting the patrol.'

'You kidding. One of the crushers belted him on the lid right at the start.'

'Well the Army got him locked up in Singapree.'

'What you say about Wainwright?' asked Varne.

Crutch shrugged his shoulders. 'Don't know yet.'

'Maybe he got pissed,' a telegraphist said.

'Who you kidding?' said Sparky. 'He got a sponge in his belly.'

'Chew bos'n,' said Varne.

'Yeah?' said Crutch.

'I put five bucks on it.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said the boy.

'What you know about chew bos'n's?' asked Varne.

'Nothing,' said the boy. 'Nothing at all. I just don't think so.'

'Listen to Moneybags Neptune,' said the telegraphist. 'He come roaring down the dock in a taxi at half past six this morning.'

'I told you I came back in it with three A.B.s from *Terror*. It just dropped me off last. That's all. Cost us three dollars each.'

'What happened to you last night?' asked Varne. 'I thought you were coming pissing-up with us?'

'There was a film I wanted to see,' said the boy.

'Didn't you have a wet?' Sparky shocked.

'Oh, yes . . . yes, I had a couple in the U.J.C. afterward.'

'Christ, what a New Year you had,' said Sparky. 'You'll be dropping any minute with exhaustion.'

Varne grabbed a plate of powdered potatoes, beans, and tinned sausages.

'Why don't some of you bright bastards aboard this bucket grow spuds in a window box? You know about everything else.'

'Yeah,' said Crutch. 'That's a good idea.'

'Of course it is,' said Varne. 'Never try for anything that's been done before.'

'Never mind that,' said Sparky. 'What about Wainwright?'

'Chew bos'n,' said Varne through a mouthful of powdered potatoes. 'Kiss me Hardy I'm coming.'

The *Homage* lay in *Tamar* basin in Hong Kong harbour. James Varne was back on pay. Also the crew were informed that five days local leave would be granted to each watch. In the morning the sky was overcast and the weather cool after Singapore. The sailors wore blues and ashore the Chinese offered eighty Hong Kong dollars for an Imperial Navy issue blanket.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the *Homage* went into the dry dock and Able Seaman James Varne went off the Imperial Navy pay register again. The trouble arose when the water was pumped out of the dock and the shipboard heads were put out of use. Anyone having cause to use them had to go ashore to the dockyard, and James Varne finding cause—went. Meanwhile, the Prince of Golder's Green chose to go ashore also, in ceremonial dress, and only the bos'n's mate was aboard to pipe the side. When James Varne returned aboard Sub-Lieutenant Swanson informed him that he was off pay.

• Yes, sir. James Varne thought. The triumph of ceremony over a natural compulsion. Yes, sir.

James Varne was also to remain aboard for the next week. It appeared that a stoppage of leave went along with a stoppage of pay.

At half-past three the shore telephone rang.

'It's you,' said Varne.

'Me?' said the boy.

'That's what the fellow said.'

The boy took the telephone. Varne stood and watched him talking and smiling into the mouthpiece.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. You've picked up with one of the W.R.A.C.s ashore. That's one off the cuff. They don't associate with low sailors. They're all virgins as pure as the driven slush. Yes, sir. They got to have all the virginal qualifications before they can join. It's part of the indoctrination. They maybe even got to swear to it on oath. Don't know about that though. Whose finger do they use to find out? Yes, sir. Whose finger?

The boy put the telephone down and stood thinking.

'What's wrong?' asked Varne. 'Can't she make it?'

'Who?' asked the boy looking at him suddenly.

'The pusher. What she say? Don't she love you any more? Or does she love you and got her knickers in a twist?'

'It's a townie of mine,' said the boy gazing at the granite walls of the dock. 'He's . . . he's in the Army. I'm going ashore to see him tomorrow.'

'Yeah?' said Varne. 'I'm disappointed.'

'Why?' asked the boy turning his gaze on Varne.

'You could have found out about the oath business.'

'Oath business?'

'The W.R.A.C.s.'

'W.R.A.C.s?'

'Forget it. Have a Kit Kat.'

Leading Signalman Crutch came across the brow from the dockyard signal tower. He grinned as he did when he knew something that no one else had even dreamed about.

'Well,' said Varne stood that way on the iron-deck, tall and wide, and the blue eyes dark in the sunbrowned face. 'What is it this time?'

Crutch grinned and surveyed the length of the upper-

deck, scratched his head, picked his nose, then cleared his throat.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. He's a mine of information this boy. You can safely bet a week's tot that if somebody tells you something and you tell Crutch and he knows nothing about it—then it's all bunk. He knows everything. Not only does he know everything but this boy can predict far into the unforeseeable future. If the Russian gentleman who got the Commies to march on Seoul had any sense he would have held over till he'd consulted Leading Signaller Horatio Hornblower Bottomly-Crutch of Her Gracious Majesty's Imperial Navy as to the outcome of it all. Yes, sir. That's Crutch for you. Some Crutch. Yes, sir.

'What you waiting for?' said Varne.

'I—know—what—Wainwright—got,' he said still with the grin.

'Yeah?' said Varne.

'Got nine months. The Andrew couldn't do much for him.'

'What the pongo get?'

'Two years hard labour.'

'Jesus Christ.'

'Yeah. He was only a private.'

James Varne came off stoppage of leave on the second night of the boxing championships. The morning of the same day Telegraphist Parker went on stoppage of leave. He came back aboard drunk. Of course, Telegraphist Parker said he was not drunk, and after all, he was the one to know, but Sub-Lieutenant Swanson said he was drunk, and that was all that really mattered.

That evening James Varne went ashore during free gangway. As he walked through the dockyard it was very quiet and the sky very bright and a heat rising off the tarred roadway and off the stone walls of the dockyard sheds. It was

pleasant walking. He walked up the slope to the dockyard gate and turned left and walked along on the pavement under the yellow painted stone pillars of the veranda overhead. Two of the rickshaw boys gathered at the gate followed him. He turned and waved them away. He had only eight dollars. James Varne wondered how he was going to get drunk on eight dollars.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Eight bucks is enough for ten pints of San Mig but ten pints is a bloody lot to booze and you get waterlogged long before you get pissed. Yes, sir. And if you go on whisky that's more expensive and you drink it a lot bloody faster too, and when you're flat you can't sit in a boozier without a few bob and you got to get out and walk around and say 'no' to all these chink pushers baring their arses in doorways—and anyway—walking around to no purpose only walks the drink you got off and you're right back where you bloody well started and without the eight bucks. That's bad. Yes, sir. You can say that again.

James Varne walked along the front and into the Luk Kwok Hotel. Inside it was dark and most of the tables empty. The lights were out and the bar was dim and cool and quiet. Three whores sat at a table by the music box talking among themselves. None of them joined Varne at the bar. He ordered a San Mig and a whisky. The Chinese barman placed the drinks on the counter and smiled at Varne.

'You won the Hong Kong Sweepstake?' said Varne.

The barman went on smiling. Varne ignored him and drank the whisky. Afterward the barman: 'Gil, John?'

'What girl?'

'Any gil.'

'Think I'm loose or something?'

'Velly good gil, John. Gobble, gobble.'

'Not interested.'

'No gil?'

'No.'

'No likee gil?'

'No.'

'What you likee?'

'A screwdriver.'

'Sc'ewdiva.'

'Yeah.'

'What you wantee sc'ewdiva?'

'Screw your navel till your arse drops off.'

By eight o'clock James Varne was broke. He went outside and started his walk around. It was dark outside and the air had cooled quickly after the sun went down and a light wind blew down off the bare hills in the New Territories and set the water breaking against the junks along the front. He walked on along the front towards the American landing stage.

Five American destroyers and three transports were tied up to the buoys at the mouth of Lei Yue Mun Channel, the transports dark and towering above the sleek illuminated destroyers.

'Hey! Hey, Varney!'

He turned and saw Blood Reed and Flashback Barker coming towards him from the crowd standing outside the hall behind the China Fleet Club.

'They giving something away free in there?' asked Varne.

'Huh!' said Blood. 'There's boxing on.'

'Thought you'd find something better to do with five days leave.'

'We thought you were fighting. Didn't we?' said Blood.

'Yeah,' said Flashback. 'Your name's on the programme.'

'That was Blue Tot the Pirate,' said Varne. 'I'm not having my kisser shoved in for sweet F.A.'

'Don't you get dropped if you win?' asked Flashback.

'They give you a fart-arsed tin cup with your name on it,' said Varne. 'Fifty bucks maybe. But, Christ, nobody's going to knock me stupid for a tin cup.'

'Maybe they give you a backhander out here,' said Blood.

'They don't give amateurs backhanders.'

'How about travelling expenses?'

'My arse. The Honk Ferry only cost thirty cents.'

'They were giving watches away last night,' said a soldier on ahead of them in the crowd.

'Yeah, middle watches,' said Varne.

'What do you mean?' asked the soldier. 'One of our lads in camp fought bantam last night and won one in the finals. It's a good watch.'



'He wore it yet?' asked Varne.

'I don't know. They put his name on the back of it.'

'Tell him not to wear it. Tell him to put it in a glass box so he can show it to his grandchildren. Don't wear it for Christsake. They're just made to go in glass boxes.'

'Bloody barmy,' said the soldier to himself. 'He's bloody barmy so he is.'

'Well come on in and see the fights anyway,' said Blood. 'It'll pass the night.'

James Varne thought about it. It was a long walk around till he went back aboard. 'Yeah. All right. We'll go on in.'

The queue moved on towards the door. Then they saw the pay box. It cost fifty cents to see the fights.

'What you reckon they're doing with the money when they're staging amateurs?' said Varne.

'Haven't got a clue, mate,' said Flashback.

'Probably buying ice-cream for the pigs round the ring-side,' said Varne thoughtfully.

'No good,' said Blood.

'What's no good?' asked Varne.

'We only got sixty cents between us.'

Varne thought about it. Afterwards: 'Hang on. Give's the programme.' Blood gave him the programme. He saw his name in the heavyweight division. 'Come on,' he said. 'Strick with me and once we're in get lost.'

It came to their turn at the pay desk. Two naval patrolmen stood to the left of the doorway. A petty officer was behind the desk.

'It's okay, Chief,' said Varne. 'I'm on tonight. These fellows are my handlers.'

'Oh!' said the petty officer. 'Is that so? Well, well now, and I'm a fan-dancer in Abdul a Bull Bull's harem.'

'Then give me a kiss till Friday,' said Varne.

'Shurrap! One dollar fifty for three.'

'I tell you I'm on tonight,' said Varne.

'You think I look soft?'

'You don't look it, mate. You are.'

The petty officer put his head out the window. 'Patrol!' he yelled. 'Throw them out!'

The two patrolmen came across. 'Scram!' said the biggest. Varne stood his ground and looked them up and down.

'You heard,' said the patrolman. 'Scram, or we'll call the wagon.'

Varne went on looking at him that way and not moving.

'Come on,' said Blood taking Varne by the arm. 'Have a go at them and we'll be inside for months.'

Varne thought about the pay register again, then they turned and walked down the steps—right into Blue Tot the Pirate and Parfet and Harry Where's Your Horse. They wore tweed suits, candy-striped shirts with starched collars, and tyrolean hats with feathers in the cords.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Something left over from a one night run at the Adelphi. Yes, sir.

'Good Lord, Varne,' said Blue Tot. 'Where are you lot going?' And adding, 'You can't go away now. You go right back inside.'

'They won't let us in,' said Blood.

'Who won't let you in?'

'The crushers,' said Blood.

'You lot go right back inside. I'll see about all this.'

'Yes,' said Parfet. 'We can't lose sight of Varne now.'

The three sailors turned and went back up the steps in front of the officers.

The patrol and the petty officer were full of excuses for turning away *Homage's* heavyweight. They went on into the hall. A ring was set up in the middle of the floor. Overhead were the ring lights in a black painted hardboard shield. The ring lights had not yet been switched on.

Varne looked around the hall and tried to estimate how many dollars had been collected for ice-cream for the gentlemen officers. Many American sailors and marines were in the hall, and Imperial soldiers, and as they went down the gangway a cheer rose from some of the crew off the *Homage*.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. There's no backing out now. I only hope the fellows I meet trained on Tiger and beans and dried spuds too. Yes, sir.

Blue Tot the Pirate was right behind him. There was not even time to find out if there was a bookmaker in the crowd who he might have been able to go in the tank with. For five bucks James Varne would have gone in the tank.

They walked past the ring and up the other gangway and

through a door on the left of the hall. Five American patrolmen stood in the passage smoking. They moved aside and watched them go past. Down the end of the passage was a door and across the top panel DRESSING ROOM in white chalk. Varne pushed the door.

'Hey! Whaddaya want, bud?' said a voice inside. Varne looked around the door and thought it was an admiral or a commodore or something with all his gold lace and ribbons. 'I'm on tonight,' Varne said. 'Any objections?'

'Yeah?' he said taking a piece of paper from a breast pocket and unfolding it. 'What's yore name, bud?'

'This is Able Seaman Varne,' said Blue Tot. 'The *Homage*. I'm the first lieutenant.'

'Ya don't say?' said Bud. 'Pleased ta meetcha.'

'I... I beg your pardon?'

'That's okay, bud. Yore boy's on the card. I guess you can come in.'

'Varne. We'll be depending on you, Varne. It'll be grand for the *Homage* if you win,' said Blue Tot. 'You will win, won't you, Varne?'

James Varne looked at him. 'Well, I'll see what I can do,' said Varne. 'Yeah. We'll see.'

About fifteen or sixteen boxers were changing or already changed and sitting on benches along the walls. The room smelled of sweat and liniment and mouthwash. Two Army P.T.Is talked with a lot of waving of arms to the soldier boxers down the end of the room. Only one other English sailor sat on the benches. He was short and with a barrel chest and long dangling arms. James Varne guessed he was a middle-weight out *Tamar* Barrack.

'Hey,' said Varne. 'You got any spare gear?'

'No,' the middleweight said. 'When you on. Maybe you can use mine later.'

'I don't know. Just got in.'

'Ask the Yank up by the door. They made the draw about ten minutes ago.'

Bud had all his boys gathered around him giving them instructions. His boys were the swellest rigged out boxers in the room. They wore dark blue robes with U.S.N. in big white letters on the backs, and white-laced boxing boots,

and with towels wrapped around their heads. James Varne walked across and jabbed him on the shoulder. 'Got any spare gear, bud?'

'Whaddya need, fella?'

'The lot,' said Varne looking around the boys. 'But I'll manage without the robe.'

The boys looked him over. Two of them were coloured.

'Whatta we got, boys?' Bud asked.

They got their travel-bags out from under the bench. One of them gave him a pair of black shorts and a blue vest. A coloured boy gave him a gum shield and a packet of bandage. Varne thanked them.

'Ya got boots?' asked Bud.

'I'll find something,' said Varne.

'Whattabout these two boys with ya? They got gear?'

'They're not fighting. They're with me.'

'Ya boxed before, fella?' one of the fighters asked.

'Me? Never,' said Varne. 'They just put me down because I was the biggest mug aboard.'

The fighters laughed. 'Jesus, yah got a patsy, Whitey,' said one.

'I fighting you?' said Varne to the one called Whitey.

Whitey stood about six foot four and had a face like maybe it had once stopped a bus.

'Yep,' said Whitey. 'But don't yah worry none, fellah. It'll be over—quick.'

'Thanks,' said Varne.

'If yah ain't fought before—how come your nose is busted?' asked Bud.

'My mother dropped me down the coal hole when I was a baby.'

When Varne got his fight gear on a P.T.I. out *Tamar* Barrack came in and asked for the naval boxers.

'Over here,' said the middleweight.

'Just the two of you?' asked the P.T.I. 'Well, looks like you'll just have to do your best. The Yanks are supposed to have this in the bag.'

'Christ!' said Blood. 'We'll piss this.'

'Who will?'

Blood indignant. 'Varney there. I once saw him flake three Bootnecks out in a boozier up Fratton Park.' The

P.T.I. gave him a sour look. 'He won't be fighting drunks tonight.'

'They wasn't pissed,' said Flashback.

'No?'

'No.' Blood and Flashback looked upset.

'Got any gym shoes?' Varne asked.

'Haven't you got boots of your own?' asked the P.T.I.

'They're aboard. I wasn't going to be here tonight.'

'What size you take?'

'Nine.'

'I'll see if the Army's got any.'

A petty officer put his head in the door. 'All set?'

'All set, bud,' Bud said.

The petty officer called two names. The *Tamar* middle-weight got up and walked out into the passage. He walked flat-footed and from the rear looked like a baby gorilla. One of the soldiers followed him out along with the two army P.T.I.s. Varne took the wrapper off the bandage. The navy P.T.I. came back with a pair of gym shoes.

'That right about them giving watches away?' asked Varne.

'That's right.'

'What they worth?'

'How should I know? They're good watches though. The Yanks put them up for prizes.'

Varne finished taping his hands. 'When am I on?'

The P.T.I. sniffed. 'Hey, you been drinking?'

'No. Sucking pandrops.'

'Never smelled pandrops like that before.'

'Whisky flavoured pandrops. Good for your chest.'

Bud went across to them. 'Bud. I ain't got no record of yore weight. Ya weigh-in this afternoon?'

'Nobody said anything about weighing-in,' said Varne.

'The fight's off,' said Bud. 'This guy's broke the rules before he even started. How do we know his weight?'

'I look like a bantam?' asked Varne.

'That makes no difference, bud. Ya ain't weighed-in and that's that.'

'Your boys windy?' asked Varne.

'Windy! Ya hear that, boys?' said Bud.

Outside the crowd went quiet as the bell sounded. The

first fight had started. Then this Whitey went across to them. 'I ain't windy, fella. I'm goin' to break yore back with one hand.'

'You don't get the chance, wings,' said Varne. 'Your mate here's just called the fight off.'

'I ain't called no fight off,' said Bud. 'If Whitey says he can flatten you I ain't goin' to stop him. No, sireeee! We can weigh-in right here and now. I'll go and have a word with the committee.'

Varne finished taping his hands as Bud came back pushing a weighing machine and followed by a commander, a major and an American officer who wore even more gold lace and ribbons than Bud himself.

'Varne. Who's Varne?' asked the commander.

'I'm Varne,' Varne said standing up.

'Why didn't you report here today for the weigh-in?'

'Nobody told me.'

'You must thank the United States Navy for allowing you to take part in the championships now. They had every right to disallow you.'

'Yes, sir,' said Varne and thanked the United States Navy aloud and inwardly hoped the watches were genuine. In the middle of the weigh-in a great cheer went up outside in the hall. No bell had rang. A knockdown midway through the second round. As Varne stepped off the scales the door swung open and the Army P.T.I.s came in carrying their boy laid out on a stretcher, and the baby gorilla out *Tamar* padding along in rear without even a sweat on.

Someone shouted Varne's name, and he followed the Americans out along with Blood and Flashback and the Navy P.T.I.

'Best of luck, mate,' called the baby gorilla.

'Cheers,' said Varne and went down the passage into the hall. A loud roar greeted Whitey. More Americans were in the hall than anyone else. They were on their feet waving their caps and shouting encouragement to Whitey. Whitey skipped on down the passage with his hands above his head and grinning at everyone.

'Where the hell's our fellows?' yelled Blood.

'Down the other end,' yelled Varne. 'Don't bother your arse about the noise.' They went down the gangway and

Varne climbed into the ring. The P.T.I. called to Blood and Flashback to get seats. Varne and the P.T.I. stood inside the ring in the blue corner. A little bald man wearing a white shirt, white trousers, and a black bow tie climbed into the ring and motioned the fighters to change corners. Varne went across into the red corner. 'There you are,' said Varne. 'A Red in a red corner. Can't lose.'

'What you talking about?' asked the P.T.I.

'Forget it. Who's the ref?'

'Some pongo major. He's okay. Saw him last night.'

The referee walked to the middle of the ring and held up both hands.

'Ladies, officers, and men. Bout number two. First heavy-weight bout of the evening. In the blue corner—Ice-Cream Soda Dispenser 1st Class Ernest Bonetti Shrenglestein of the United States Navy.'

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. With a monicker like that no wonder they call you Whitey. Yes, sir. A genuine old American name. Three cheers for Italy. Yes, sir.

The referee had to wait over till the Americans quietened down. 'In the red corner Able Seaman James Varne of the Imperial Navy.' The stamping of American feet drowned any noise made by the crew of the *Homage*. Afterward the referee called both fighters to the middle of the ring and told the boxers to box cleanly and no rabbit and kidney punches. In his corner Varne did two knee-bends with his hands on the top rope. Whitey danced and waved to his shipmates.

The bell rang and the referee waved both fighters out their corners. They moved out and met in the middle of the ring. Varne feinted his left then right to the head then left-hooked viciously to the body. Whitey back pedalled, hunched over and not liking it to the body. Varne walked flat-footed after him. With two more fights during the evening he did not want to waste energy on fancy foot-work. He lowered his guard, Whitey came in shooting out left leads that were way off. Varne moved back, gloves waist high. Whitey led with the left and swung his right up and over. Varne stepped inside and let go with both hands to the body. Whitey tried to hold and Varne leaned on and as they broke brought his right up over the heart. Whitey

came back off the rope straight into right and left hooks to the head. Varne sidestepped and stood over as Whitey pitched forward onto his face.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. That watch is as good as mine. Old Baldy can count over him till the China Sea freezes. Yes, sir.

Whitey was still unconscious when they carried him back to the dressing-room. Bud stood amongst his boys looking at Varne as if he was a traitor.

The second fight was not so easy. He was an Army boy who had a bye in the draw for the first fights. He was in good condition. He could run too. Varne caught him with a good left hand to the body early in the first round. Afterward he never stopped running. In the second Varne went in fast after him. But it was not till the bell went for the end of the round that he caught the Army boy with a hard right-handed shot behind the ear. They did not have him out of the daze before the bell for the third round and when it went Varne moved out and the Army boy tore right on past him and started flailing the post in Varne's corner. When the referee went across to see how it was with him the boy turned on him. That was the end of Punchy McGill. They had to take him round to the Fleet Club and put him under a cold shower before he found out the fight was over.

In the final, Varne was in with one of the coloured Americans. He had come through on two points decisions. The Americans who had been quiet after Varne put Whitey down yelled for revenge. The first round started off quietly. The way the coloured boy crouched and weaved around showed he knew a little about the fight game. He went in fast feinting and landing left-hand jabs about Varne's face. By the time Varne lined him up he was back out of range again. He was fast, and apart from being fast, he was good. Varne changed his tactics. He lifted his hands and opened his elbows. The coloured boy landed twice to his ribs. Varne found the punches carried no real power. The boy was a powder-puff puncher. Varne let him come in for the remainder of the round and contented himself blocking and holding back on the counter-punching.

The second round, Varne went in and landed both to the body and the head. The boy held on trying to tie Varne



up. Varne pushed him off and landed heavily to the body with the right. The boy covered up, crouching low. Varne switched to the head. The boy came up covering his face and chest. Varne lined him up and let him have everything in a right under the ribs. He grunted and started to go at the knees. Varne left-hooked him and swung his right up and over and clubbed him on the forehead. The referee did not bother to count. He raised Varne's arm and Blood and Flashback were through the ropes into the ring and slapping his back and congratulating him. Varne looked down into the crowd and even the Americans applauded him. Everyone applauded. Bud and another officer were dragging the coloured boy to his corner, and down under the ring apron Varne saw Blue Tot the Pirate jumping up and down alongside Parfet and Harry Where's Your Horse with a grin on his face almost as big as a new cut in the Suez Canal. Then something hit Varne on the shoulder. Above the noise he heard it hit the canvas. He looked down and saw a large silver coin rolling around and around at his feet—then another and another and another, and Blood and Flashback yelling at him and grabbing at the money. American money. The most expensive money in the world. Varne grinned and waved to the Americans. They *were* the best goddamn fighting men in the world.

Yes, sir. James Varne thought. Fight for America's Freedom. Yes, sir. For that kind of money I would too. Yes, sir.

He strutted around the ring. The money kept coming. He stopped and grinned for the benefit of anyone who wanted to take his picture to show their grandchildren. A dollar piece hit him on the bridge of the nose. He went on grinning. He did not worry about a little thing like that.

No, sir. James Varne thought. They can throw bricks at me for all I care. Yes, sir. As long as they're gold bricks. Yes, sir.

Varne climbed through the ropes and down to the presentation table by the ringside. The Commander-in-Chief Far East Imperial Fleet stood smiling behind the table. He was a grand old gentleman with silver hair and greatly resembled the fellow seen on the advert for a famous brand of whisky. And not only did he look the part but smelled it.

'Varne,' he said. 'Able Seaman Varne. This I know is your proudest moment. It is wonderful to have seen the United Services Heavyweight Championship captured by the Imperial Navy. Also I am happy to present you with this watch on behalf of the United States Navy. Good luck and good fighting.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. My proudest moment, sir,' said Varne and took the cup and watch and headed back to the dressing-room, Blood and Flashback following in the rear.

The baby gorilla was showing his watch off to the fighters still changing.

'How much it worth?' Varne asked.

'Don't know,' said the gorilla holding it to his ear. 'It ticks though.'

'Isn't that great?'

Blood and Flashback were counting the money on the bench.

'How much we got?' asked Varne.

'Ninety-eight bucks,' said Flashback. 'How you like that?'

'Generous bastards,' said Varne.

'And that's Yank bucks,' said Blood.

Varne pulled on his trousers and whitefront. Blood had the money wrapped in a handkerchief. Varne put the gear he borrowed on the bench. The Americans were still out with the coloured boy having a scroll presented to him as runner up. They went back out and down the hall. They were almost to the door.

'Varne! I say, Varne!' Blue Tot the Pirate and Parfet and Harry Where's Your Horse came down the gangway carrying their tyrolean hats. 'Wonderful! Wonderful show!' said Blue Tot. 'Jolly good all round.'

'Thanks,' said Varne. 'Don't mention it.'

'Yes,' Parfet said. 'Good show.'

'As I said,' said Varne.

'I'm glad I came along,' said Harry Where's Your Horse. 'It's the first real fight I've seen.'

'Come round the Fleet Club some night about closing time,' said Varne.

'Really?'

'They don't bother with referees and bells.'

'That trophy will look swell in the wardroom cupboard,'

said Blue Tot. 'I trust you shan't lose it on the way back to the ship.'

'It won't get lost,' said Varne. 'We're just going round the Fleet Club for a feed of prawns and fried rice then we're going back aboard for a good night's kip.'

'Grand. Grand. You know, the captain's going to be jolly pleased about this. What?'

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'As I said.'

'Well, good luck.'

'Thank you.'

'It's been an exciting evening,' said Harry Where's Your Horse. 'I won't forget it.'

'I'm glad you liked it,' said Varne and watched them go down the steps. A taxi stopped for them and they climbed in and drove back down the front towards the Royal Yacht Club.

'Where you say we're going?' asked Blood looking at Varne strangely. 'The flaming Fleet Club?'

'The pawn shop. Come on.'

They went down the steps and along the front, right, up past the rice stalls bright from carbide lamps and the warm penetrating smells of frying foods, across the lower main street and on across the square to Johnston Road running down to Wanchai from Central District.

They crossed Johnston Road between two tramcars. The tramcars open-fronted and children with balloons and coloured streamers. Inside the tramcars were mirrors so placed so standing passengers could watch their pockets.

The pawn shop was on the bend of the road opposite the Children's Playground and Y.M.C.A. buildings. The inside of the pawn shop was only a stone shelter with a small hole cut high up in the back wall where the clerk leaned down and was handed the customer's goods. They had decided it safest to be as far out of reach of the public as possible. The place was empty.

It was James Varne's saddest moment. He handed the clerk up the cup. 'How much, John?' The clerk turned the cup around under the light then turned it over and looked at the base. He shook his head and grinned sorrowfully. He had so many gold and diamond-set teeth he was a walking bank vault.

'How muchee want?'

'Forty bucks.'

The clerk almost fell out the window. 'Fo'ty bucks! No, no, no, no, no fo'ty bucks!'

'Okay, thirty-five.'

'What? You thinkee me?' said the clerk tapping his head. Varne had no wish to hurt his feelings at that moment. 'How much then?'

'You say.'

'No. You say.'

'No, no, no. You plopetly. You say.'

And Varne in his saddest moment parting with his treasured cup, 'Thirty bucks.'

'Twenty.'

'Okay, but it's worth more.'

The clerk looked down at him as Confucious might. 'Eve'ybody own opinion.'

Varne took the watch out his pocket and handed it up, all the while looking sad. 'How much the watch?'

The clerk held it to his ear then took the back off and examined it through an eye-glass.

'It works,' Varne said. 'Hear it tick?'

The clerk looked down at him and smiled. 'Good watchee you no heal tick.'

Varne wished he was nearer the ground. 'How much then?'

The clerk looked at the watch again. 'Twenty-five bucks.'

'Go on!' said Varne. 'It's worth about a hundred.'

Sailors are experts at valuing watches.

'Takee or leavee,' said the clerk smiling gold and diamonds.

'Okay,' said Varne. 'Okay. But you seen me off.'

'Chinese pawn blokel velly honest. You makee good ba'gain.'

He wrote out the pawn ticket with a brush then handed it down with the forty-five dollars. Varne looked at the pawn ticket. It was about a foot square and blazed all over with black ink.

'Won't lose it easy, will I?' said Varne and went outside without waiting for the clerk's comment.

The smell that came off the harbour water at nights was beginning to come down.

'Here,' said Blood and handed the handkerchief with the money to Varne.

'We'll split it,' said Varne. 'I'm a good Red.'

'No,' said Flashback. 'We don't want it. Christ, you worked for that!'

'Go on. We'll split it.'

'No,' said Blood. 'You keep it.'

'Yeah,' said Flashback. 'But you can buy us a few wets though.' He laughed.

Varne counted out the money he got from the pawn shop. 'Here. Twenty bucks apiece.'

'Naaw! Sure as Christ we don't want it.'

'Take it. If you hadn't picked it up the pigs would. Here.'

'Well, okay,' said Blood. 'If you're sure.'

'Sure, I'm sure.'

They took the money and walked on up Johnston Road. Now most of the shops had iron grills on down the front and the street-walkers were starting to take up their night stances in doorways and under the arches out over the pavements. Near the top of the rise of Johnston Road, across the way from the Rediffusion buildings, were the better of the downtown gift shops, glass fronted and with bearded Sikhs sitting in chairs in the doorways armed with shotguns. Everywhere the better shops had Sikhs with shotguns on guard outside, and business houses, and banks. There were other guards inside of the banks, too.

Varne waved down a White Star taxi driving up empty from the Fleet Club. They stood under the awning over a photographer's shop while the taxi waited at the junction for the flow of traffic on Johnston Road to ease. When he finally drove across Blood and Flashback climbed in the back.

'Know a good money changer, John?' Varne asked through the window. The driver nodded enthusiastically. 'Know numma one money change.'

'Get me a good money changer and you're on five bucks extra.'

The driver sat up. 'What money you changee.'

'Yank dollars.'

'Yessa. Jumpee in.'

He was roaring past *Tamar* Main Gate before Varne got

the door shut. For five dollars he would have swam across to Kowloon with his cab on his back.

They drove over into Victoria Central past the Hong Kong-Shanghai Banking Corporation building and the Communist Bank of China building on the left and on along Des Voux Road in the flow of traffic and swinging out to pass the tramcars bright lit and with people sat inside looking out into the dark and suddenly driving wide and sharp left into the dark of a side street and driving on, bumping and jolting, and changing down gears as the street got more steep and there no lights and it very dark. They were climbing up among the better houses of the working Chinese, and the better Chinese people's eating houses, and the better whorehouses: all behind Victoria Central on the bottom slopes of the Peak.

The taxi swung into a street on the right where the road flattened out and drove on. The driving was smoother. Out the windows, between houses, they caught glimpses of the bright lit city below, and the ships in harbour lit up, and the lights of Kowloon City across the harbour and beyond, the dark of the hills against the clear, starred sky in the New Territories. The taxi stopped with a jolt outside a house where some Chinese sat in the doorway playing mah jong. The driver turned and winked. 'Numma one Yankee money change.' One of the men in the game got up and came over and put his head through the open window. The driver spoke to him in Chinese. The man looked at the sailors in back.

'How muchee dolla you change?' the driver asked.

'Ninety-eight,' said Varne and untied the handkerchief.

The man looked at the money and went into the house.

'Yankee dolla go Chinaside. Yankee dolla velly good Chinaside. You askee seven Hong Kong dolla one Yankee dolla. Hokay?' the driver said.

'Okay, John,' said Blood.

The man came back with an old man with a shaven head. Varne opened the door.

'You changee Yankee dolla?' the old man asked.

'That's right,' said Varne. 'How much?'

The old man looked at him then at the money. 'Six dolla.'

'We'll find someplace else,' said Varne slamming the door shut.

'No,' said the old man raising his hand and peering through half closed eyes in the window. 'How muchee you say?'

'Eight,' said Varne.

The old man shook his head. The stubble on his head was white in the light from the doorway.

'Okay, John,' said Varne to the driver. The driver started the engine. The old man raised his hand again. 'How muchee?'

'Seven fifty,' said Varne.

The younger man said something into the ear of the old man.

'Seven dolla,' said the old man finally.

Varne afterward opening the door: 'Okay. Let's see your money.'

The old man put his hand down his shirt and brought out a bundle of notes. Varne counted his money out onto the floor of the taxi in the light from the doorway.

'Okay?' he asked when finished counting.

The old man nodded and counted out six hundred and eighty-six Hong Kong dollars alongside of Varne's.

'Hokay?' said the old man.

'Fine,' said Varne and took the six single notes off the top and gave them to the younger man. The man bowed and smiled. The old man picked the American dollars up and Varne closed the door. The driver had the engine started again and let the clutch in.

'Whea you go?' the driver shouted as they went back along the street.

'Too late for the Fleet Club,' said Varne. 'Any ideas?'

'What about someplace down Central?' said Flashback.

'Yeah,' said Blood. 'Know any good boozers down Central, Varney?'

'You know the King Foo?' called Varne.

The driver nodded without turning around. 'You go King Foo?'

'Yeah. Okay?'

'Hokay,' he laughed. 'Plenty gils King Foo.'

The sailors sat back in the seat as they started going downhill.

'What's this King Foo place?' Blood asked.

'Night club,' said Varne. 'Sometimes it's good sometimes it's lousy. Might be good tonight.'

'We hope,' said Blood sitting back.

'You'll do okay for money now with Port Watch leave coming off, Varney,' said Flashback.

'Yeah. They kept me without money for so long I forgot what it is.'

'Never mind,' said Blood. 'You can have a blow out now.'

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'I'll be pissed as Ole King Cole my five days.'

The taxi stopped outside of the King Foo and they climbed out onto the pavement. The smell off the water was strong down that close to the harbour.

'What's that?' Varne asked.

'Five dolla,' said the driver. 'Hokay?'

'Hokay,' said Varne and gave him a twenty dollar note. 'Thanks for the help.'

The driver looked at the note in the light off the dashboard.

'Thank you! Thank you, John. Numma one, John.'

Varne waved him away then turned and went into the club behind Blood. The noise and the smoke and the smells of food met them as they went through the door. A long flight of carpeted stairs faced them a little to the right of the door. The railings and balustrade were heavy and carved. The stairs led to the balcony above and overlooking the diners at the tables below. All along the balcony were pots of bright flowers and long trailing plants much like ivy only having red flowers hanging in clusters like paper bells. Behind the pots of flowers and trailers showed the black oiled heads of the Phillipino band.

'You want to eat first?' asked Varne.

'No,' said Blood. 'I'm not hungry. Let's go upstairs and have a wet.'

'Yeah,' said Flashback. 'Come on.'

They went upstairs. Looking over the balustrade Varne saw all the white-covered tables and the diners at the tables and the white-coated waiters going between the tables with trays, and others standing discreetly among the palms around the walls watching the diners at the tables. The diners were



Chinese and Europeans, mostly Europeans. Varne counted three young women among them. He wondered what they did for a living in Victoria City. The King Foo was one of those places where the rich do not go, and where the poor can not afford. Sailors could not really afford it either but they sometimes went there on pay week when they had money and wanted a better class whore.

Upstairs was pretty crowded. A drinks counter stood against the far wall and a long mirror ran along the wall with glass shelves laden with bottles. Wicker tables and chairs were scattered around the small dance floor in front of the band. Only two American sailors were in the bar. They were very drunk. The rest were German and Dutch merchant sailors mostly wearing jean trousers and sweat shirts. The girls were Chinese, and Chinese-Portuguese wearing cheongsams and with black lacquered hair. They sat on high stools along the drinks counter watching the men and trying to guess what each might be worth.

The three sat at a table over back of the bar and a waiter came across and handed them the drinks card. The drinks card resembled a menu and had the different brands of beers and spirits written in English and German and replicas of labels alongside each for the benefit of anyone not knowing English or German.

'What we having?' asked Varne.

'San Mig,' said Blood.

'Same,' said Flashback.

'Two San Mig and a Dortmunder,' said Varne.

The waiter went away. The band started playing. Some of the merchant sailors with girls got up and went across to the dance floor. The waiter came back with the beers. He set the tray on the table and took the tops off the bottles with a key. The Dortmunder was silver wrapped like a liqueur bottle. Varne paid the waiter and tipped him. He would not keep them waiting. So many dancers crowded the floor they just stood in one place and pushed each other the way the notion took them. The beer was very warm.

'Jesus Christ,' said Varne. 'For a dollar half the bottle you'd think they'd cool it.'

'Them squareheads probably drank all the cold stuff,' said Blood.

'I don't like this place tonight. It's lousy tonight. I told you it was lousy some nights. Well it's lousy tonight.'

'Aaaaawh,' said Flashback. 'Let's give it a try.'

'All you're interested in is those pushers,' said Varne. 'Your lamps are stuck out your head like half-sucked bulls-eyes. I tell you this place is as hostile as the United Nations.'

'Yeah. Take your eyes off them pushers,' said Blood.

'Tomorrow's the last day of our leave,' complained Flashback.

'You been at it the past four days,' said Varne.

'No we haven't. We been kipping in the Fleet Club.'

'Yeah?' said Varne.

'Well—we did have one all-night sesh in the White Horse,' said Blood.

The White Horse was a hotel down Wanchai. It was out of bounds and usually raided twice a night by either the Imperial Navy or Army shore patrols. Then the proprietor had a bright idea and had a door cut into the rooms over the undertaker's shop next door. They could put out of bounds on almost any place, but to hoist the Skull and Crossbones outside a place like that would have been too much, so business thrived like never before and it was the only undertaker's whorehouse the crew of the *Homage* ever came across.

'Ow you do?' It was a girl from the stools by the drinks counter. She stood with both hands on the back of one of the vacant chairs at the table.

'Sit down. Sit you down. Park your bank book there,' said Flashback smacking the seat of the chair with his hand. 'The girl giggled and sat down. 'You buy me d'ink, yeah?'

'Sure,' said Flashback. 'What you have?'

'Gin ana lime, yeah?'

'Hey!' Flashback yelled at the waiter. 'A gin and lime.'

'Listen to the baron here,' said Varne. 'His old man's president of the Hong Kong-Shanghai Banking Corporation.'

'Aaawh, you're only young once.'

'The pushers you pick up you'll never see thirty, mate.'

'Whatta matta you?' the girl asked. 'I not askee you d'ink.'

Varne stood up and put his cap on.

'Where you going?' asked Blood.

'I'm hungry. I'm going downstairs. You coming?'

'I'm not hungry. Sit down. The waiter'll bring you something up.'

'I'll go down. I don't like the beer anyway. It's too warm. Sure you're not hungry?'

'No. No thanks.'

'You don't have to go, Varney,' said Flashback. 'There's some nice pushers here. Christ, you can afford one.'

'I know. But I'm not drunk enough.'

Varne went downstairs. The only empty table was beside two Europeans. The man was tall and thin and wore a handlebar moustache. The woman with him was fat and wearing a red cocktail dress. Both were talking loudly and the woman waving her hands very importantly. A waiter appeared.

'Table, si?'

'No. No thanks,' said Varne.

'Good table, si.'

'No. It's all right. Thanks anyway.' Varne went outside. The air was cool but the smell off the harbour was bad. The street was almost deserted. The street was narrow and back off the front, about five minutes' walk from the ferry. It was dark in the street and the tall office buildings either side rose darkly up into the dark sky. No taxis were about and Varne walked back along the street towards the ferry.

He turned down the first street that opened onto the front. On either side were the tall dark buildings of the shipping offices and insurance brokers. The buildings were out over the pavements and supported by ornate arches. Varne walked along under the arches. The smell off the water got worse the nearer he walked to the front. Old shrunken women under dirty shawls stood back in most of the deep doorways under the arches and called out: 'Ssssst! Ssssst! Johnny!' and stepped out the doorways and smiled toothless smiles. Only the very poor or the very perverted went down to the old women under the arches in the doorways.

Varne rounded the corner onto the front at the time a newly docked ferry let its ramp down and the people came ashore. The front was bright lit and pleasant after the dark of the back streets. The people who came ashore from the ferry were mostly Chinese. Varne started across the roadway, then stepped back to let a taxi past. As he stepped

back he saw a window of a shipping office lit up and filled with clocks. The large clock in the centre had a card underneath that said: HONG KONG. The hands showed it was twenty minutes to one o'clock. It was too late for the Fleet Club restaurant. The other clocks showed the time in different cities throughout the world. Varne walked across to the taxi rank in the middle of the roadway by the ferry. 'Fleet Club, John?'

'You go Fleet Club?' the driver said.

'What you think I said: "Sunning House"?''

'Hokay, John. Fleet Club.'

Varne got in and sat down. They drove past the large car packed square with its flood-lit buildings and tree bordered park in the centre and drove up the winding roadway with its high iron railings and trees on one side and the red brick wall of the dockyard on the other. Varne felt his whitefront for his cigarettes, found them and took them out. The packet was empty. He threw it out the window. The taxi turned sharp left and drove fast along the inside of the tram-rails towards Wanchai. James Varne sat back and closed his eyes and tried to feel a little less disgusted.

He paid the taxi off at the Fleet Club and went in the top door. The shop inside was shuttered and the door to the bar closed. No one attended the desk. A night light shone over it and another light burned over the stone stairs. Varne knocked on the desk. Two or three minutes later an old Chinaman wearing a white jacket appeared from the baggage store.

'A bed ticket, John,' said Varne.

'All booked,' said the Chinaman clearing his throat.

'You must have a bed.'

'No bed,' shrugging his shoulders and not looking at Varne.

Varne sighed. 'All right. All right, you know what to do with your beds.'

The old Chinaman shrugged his shoulders again and went on staring down at the polished desk. 'No bed.'

'Okay, John. Forget it,' said Varne and walked past the shop and out the bottom door. He noticed a few children still up near the end of the arcade by the pillars. He turned towards the front. A girl about twelve years old stepped in

front of him with her tray. 'Cig'ettes? Chewing gum? Likee me?' she said and smiling after the latter.

'What cigarettes you got?'

'Lucky St'ike. Camel. Chest'field.'

'What about the Woodbines?'

'Only sell Amelican cig'ettes now.'

'You keep up with the times, Rosebud.'

'What you say?' The girl watching his face in the near dark.

'Forget it. I'll take the Camel.' She handed him the cigarettes and he gave her two dollars and went on towards the front.

He stopped, lit a cigarette, stuck his hands down the flap of his trousers, then walked across to the side of the quay and stood leaning on the rail, smoking, and staring out across the harbour. It was very dark and quiet, and way down past the navy dockyard one of the ferries, lit up, and steaming slowly across to Kowloon. Along the front it was darker still in the shadows of the lights of the Fleet Club and The Flying Angel. Beyond, Varne saw the carbide and acetylene lamps under the canvas roofs of the rice stalls. He decided to finish the cigarette then go along and get something to eat.

On the corner by the Fleet Club some street-walkers had gathered to try and catch the drunks as they went in to bed. Some girls had left the rice stalls and wandered across to stand by the rails by the American jetty. Anyone who found nothing uptown to their taste always came down to the stretch of quay between the Fleet Club and the rice stalls to see what was being offered.

Varne spun the cigarette into the water and stood back off the rail. Two girls were standing a little to the right. The girl nearest him wore a blue cheongsam split to the thighs. She was laughing, said something to the other girl, and laughed again. Varne looked at them closely. The nearest girl turned and looked him up and down, then spoke to the other. Varne wondered what was happening. Usually they just came up and asked outright. The girl nearest turned suddenly and winked at him, then walked away. He watched her cross the front into the dark in direction of the rice stalls.

As Varne turned to look at the other he saw her move closer, then stop as she saw him watch her. He could not see her face clearly in the shadow, but she wore a green cheongsam and stood upright with her hands on the rail and not moving and looking out across the black water. She was not tall but even in the shadows he saw she was wonderfully made. Without seeing her face and in spite of the long split cheongsam he felt something about her. Not that there was anything outwardly different about her from the other girls, and not that he could tell anything about her in the shadows, except that she was wonderfully made. It was really nothing he could see, just something inwardly he felt. Without even seeing her face he was aware of this feeling that held him. He had not experienced anything such as it before. Chinese girls were all right but he never thought anything seriously about them.

He lit another cigarette. When the flare of the match went out his eyes he saw her looking at him. He smiled. She looked away, not hurriedly, but smoothly, her eyes first, then her head, back and high, and her chin up. He walked slowly along and stood beside her, his elbow on the rail. She did not look at him or move her head. She was very beautiful. He did not think she was wholly Chinese. She was too beautiful to be Chinese. He could feel rather than see a dignity and bearing about her that the Chinese did not have.

'You smoke?' asked Varne softly and flicked a cigarette half out the pack.

She did not look at him. He held the cigarettes in front of her. She did not look at them. He awfully wanted her to speak. He was sure she was not a whore. He held the cigarettes steady in front of her.

'Go ahead,' he said. 'Have a cigarette. I don't want anything. I'm going in to bed in a while.'

She turned her head and looked at him. 'I not smoke.'

Varne stood upright, 'What you say?'

'I not smoke.'

'I know . . . but. . . How come you talk like that?'

'You talk too. Yes?' She spoke every syllable clear, round, and precise.

'Yeah, I know I do—but not Chinese.'

'How you speak Chinese? Chop, chop!'

'I mean . . . I never met a chink pusher who could talk English like you.'

'How you mean: "Chink pusher"?'

'Well . . . I . . . You know what I mean—I mean. . . .'

'I know what you mean,' she said slowly moving her head as she spoke.

'I'm sorry. Really I am. I didn't mean you.'

'I can not accept your apology. I am honest too. I am just . . . how you say: "Chink pusher".'

'No, no. You got it all wrong.'

'No. You got it all wrong.'

'Christ Almighty I . . .'

'You know Christ too?'

Varne looked down at her. She had a beautiful face, large eyes, tilted slightly at the corners: eyes that looked at him with great depth. He could not remember a word of what she said, nor could he think of anything; nor could he take his eyes from her face.

'Can you say: R-r-r-r-r?' Varne found himself saying.

The girl's tiny mouth tilted at the corners and the shadow of dimples came into her cheeks. 'R-r-r-r-r. Does that please? R-r-r-r-r. Yes?'

She was the first Chinese he had heard pronounce the letter *r* like that. He just went on looking down at her and trying to think of something he could say that would not make him feel silly. Finally: 'Sure you don't want a cigarette?'

'I not smoke now. Thank you.'

Varne quietly. 'No?'

'No thank you.'

He pushed the cigarettes down his whitefront. It was quiet and only the water lapped gently below in the dark.

'Well?' said the girl softly and without looking at him.

'Well? Well, what?' Varne quietly.

'I just say: "Well?"' she said not moving her head and her eyes out across the harbour. Varne looked at her, then out across the harbour as though searching for her thoughts in the darkness.

Suddenly the girl: 'Well, please say: "Yes" or "No" or just go away. Please.'

Varne turned. She looked steadily out across the black water, not moving, her hands tightly on the rail.

'What?'

'You have to buy room. I not have house.' She spoke rapidly, her eyes out across the black water.

'I didn't think. . . .' He saw her lips move soundlessly. 'It's not the way,' he went on.

Hurriedly. 'Yes. Yes, that is how I learn English. All the sailors—soldiers. Good way to learn English. Get paid to learn.' Her eyes still looked out across the harbour.

'I didn't think that at all.'

'Yes.'

'I just didn't think that,' said Varne, his eyes narrowed and looking down at her.

'Why not you think this?'

'It just. . . .' Varne throwing the cigarette over the rail. 'Well I just didn't think that.'

'I not have house. But you not say yet.' She looked at him all the while she spoke.

'You want to?' Varne still looking down at her that way.

'If I want?' she said. 'And you?'

'I want to eat. You want to eat?'

'I not have house.'

Varne paying no attention to her words, 'We'll go eat,' he said turning away from the dark out across the harbour. 'Come on.' She walked alongside of him. They walked across the front towards the rice stalls. She did not reach his shoulder. And Varne never thought much about short girls either.

The smells of the cooking foods in the stalls made Varne feel more hungry. The girl stopped by a stall.

'You want to eat here?' asked Varne.

'I eat too?' The girl searching his face.

'Sure you do. You eat like everybody else, don't you?'

Her eyes on the pavement. 'Thank you. Thank you very much.'

She was more beautiful in the lamplight, her face oval and the black hair thick and tied back and her skin tanned and smooth.

'You know someplace else we can eat?' asked Varne.

'It very cheap to eat here.'



'That doesn't matter. You know some place?'

'Good place?'

'Yeah, well decent,' said Varne feeling awkward. She looked up at him, her eyes large and searching his face. His hand touched his broken nose. 'Hope I don't frighten you,' he said.

'You not frighten me. You very handsome.' Her smiling and the dimples large.

'You don't have to tell lies,' said Varne grinning.

'I not tell lie.'

'There's a place where girls go who tell lies. Come on, let's eat.'

'We eat here.' The girl indicating the stall.

'No. We'll eat some place decent.'

She walked along at his side, tiny and delicate and moving with grace. Varne crossed to the outer side of the pavement. She looked up at him. He smiled. She smiled. He walked close to her. He thought very much about her and watched her from the corner of his eye and they turned and walked downtown by the playground.

They passed an hotel, the windows shut and green venetian blinds open in the windows. Inside were wall-lights on the pink walls and white clothed tables: and inside it seemed pink and cool and quiet.

'How about it?' asked Varne.

She looked in the windows. 'Too expensive.'

The building was freshly painted yellow on the outside. Above the door was a carved gateway in gilt and underneath: PEKING HOTEL. Chinese and European Cuisine.

'It's Chinese. Not like one of those uptown dives with fat old whites laying around stuffing themselves.'

She looked in the windows again: 'I don't know.'

'Come on,' said Varne and took her by the arm and guided her in the doorway. It was a revolving door and Varne tried not to walk too fast in case he tripped her, and he tripped and knocked his head on the glass. She stepped out and waited for him. He felt an absolute idiot. She smiled and he did not feel any easier. 'You drunk?' she said.

'That's the trouble. If I was drunk I wouldn't have tripped.'

A Chinese wearing a white European suit and with

smoothed down hair came across the carpeted lobby. 'Good evening, si,' he said to Varne in English, then said in Chinese what Varne took to be the same to the girl.

'We eat here?' asked Varne.

'Of course, si,' said the Chinese and said something to the girl and they smiled.

'What's he gabbing about?' Varne asked the girl.

'What's wrong? You're angry. He said he never turn business away. But I think this too expensive.'

'We'll eat,' said Varne turning his gaze on the Chinese.

'Of course,' said the Chinese and opened the restaurant door. They went in, Varne behind the girl. The restaurant was air-conditioned and he felt the coolness on his face and neck. The waiter inside the door bowed and led them to a table in the far corner back against the wall in an alcove. When they sat down he handed them both a menu. Varne took it, looked at it, and wished the waiter would go away. It was the first time he had ever been in such a grand place. Not that the Peking was really grand. Not like the Cathay or the Peninsula. But it seemed very grand to James Varne.

The girl put the menu down and waited. Varne looked at the waiter, then at the girl. 'What you want to eat?'

'Only a little, please. I not hungry.'

'I'm going to have something like at home. Chinese is all right but you're famished afterward. You like some too?'

'If you wish,' said the girl.

'Okay, John,' said Varne. 'We'll have the pressed duck.'

'That too expensive,' the girl said looking at the menu.

'Bring the duck, John,' said Varne to the waiter. 'And we'll have all the trimmings that go before it and after it too. Okay, John?'

'Yessa. Eve'ything on menu to go with plessed duck. I unastand, si'. Eve'ything.'

'That's right. And bring two dozen oysters for a kick off.'

'Two dozen oysters, si'.

'Yeah—each!' You could get a dozen oysters for fifty cents, that much he knew. And back home all the big knobs had oysters before they started in on the rest. The waiter hurried away writing on a small notebook as he went. The girl was looking at Varne very surprised.

'Anything wrong?' said Varne casually and took a cigar-

ette out and lit it and leaned back in his chair like he remembered the stars in films did.

'This cost too much. You know that?' the girl said.

'Nothing at all,' said Varne and blew smoke at the carpet like he spent half his life in swank hotels eating oysters and pressed duck.

They ate in silence till it came to the pressed duck, then he waved the waiter across and asked if there was a wine waiter. The waiter said there was not but that he had a wine list. Varne looked at the list like he knew everything about wine then ordered a bottle of something that had a long fancy French name. He hoped it was a white wine. He seemed once to have heard from someone somewhere that white wine went with pressed duck. Maybe he had once read it—maybe. On the other hand maybe he had it all wrong. Hell, he thought, you can't be right all the time. It turned out that it was a white wine. Whether it was the right wine or not, he did not know, but it went very well with the pressed duck.

Varne ate till he could eat no more. The girl ate well too. She had told a lie when she said she had not been hungry. They had not talked. Between eating they had only smiled at each other. Varne felt wonderfully well when she smiled at him. Afterward he asked the waiter for the bill. Each item had been marked down separately. It amounted to very little considering what they had eaten. Varne gave the waiter a fifty dollar bill. The waiter looked faintly surprised and bowed before he left the table. The man wearing the white European suit was at the cash desk when the waiter went to pay the bill. They talked together, the man looking across at Varne and the girl while the waiter got the change.

The waiter handed him the tray with the change. He left three dollars on the tray. The waiter thanked him very politely then bowed and went away. Varne and the girl after sitting a little while got up to leave and walked across the restaurant. The man wearing the white European suit stepped away from the window of the cash desk. 'Enjoy the meal, si?' he said and said something to the girl. The girl talked rapidly and afterward smiled.

'That's right,' said Varne. 'Very good. Ding how.'

The man smiled and bowed till Varne saw the top of the

smoothed down hair. 'I most pleased, si'. Velly.' Continuing, 'Maybe something else . . . a loom?' he said without the smile.

Varne looked at the girl. She turned away. 'Yeah. All right. We'll have the room.' The man smiled broadly. 'Of cou'se, si'. Velly beautiful looms, si'. Eight dolla loom I lecommend, si'.'

'Yeah,' Varne said not looking at the girl.

'This way, madam,' the man said and opened the restaurant door and let them out into the lobby. The girl walked in front. Varne paid for the room at the desk. The man gave the girl a pen to sign the register. When she finished he gave the pen to Varne. The girl had signed: Reika Mitsugami. Nationality: Japanese. The police were very strict about hotel registers. They checked them twice nightly. Varne wrote: Davey Locker. Greenland.

A small Chinese boy wearing a blue uniform with *Peking Hotel* in gold above the breast pocket took them up in the lift. The room was on the third floor. They followed the boy down the corridor to a room at the end. He opened the door and put the lights on. Varne gave him twenty cents. He grinned and winked then went out and closed the door. They stood in the middle of the room looking at each other. Varne did not speak. The room was quite chilly. He went across and closed the veranda doors and drew the curtains. The girl remained in the middle of the room. The floor was carpeted and two deep basket chairs with red cushions stood either side of the electric fire in the tiled fireplace. Varne put the fire on and sat down. The girl remained where she was.

'Won't you sit down?' he asked.

'Thank you.' She sat on the edge of the other chair, her knees together and drawing the back half of the cheongsam up to close the splits in the skirt. She looked at the fire. The splits did not close and her legs remained bare to the hip. She had beautiful legs, smooth and tanned. She had a beautiful figure and a beautiful face. She was very beautiful.

Varne lit a cigarette. A door opened off the other side of the room by the end of the big silk-covered bed. Varne got up and went across and opened it. It was the bathroom. There was a pastel green washbasin and a pastel green bath

and a shower over the bath and a pink flowered water-proofed curtain to be pulled across the bath when using the shower. White bath towels hung over a rail on the wall behind the bath and two blue towelling bathrobes on pegs on the door. The girl watched him.

'What you know?' said Varnc. 'They gave us a fancy bathroom as well.'

'Yes,' she said moving her head then looking back at the fire. He closed the door and went back and sat in the chair. They sat without talking and afterward he put the cigarette out in an ashtray on the table by the chair. Suddenly: 'You want to get up early?' he asked.

'No. No, and you?'

'No. I'm off till midday. I'm thirty-six off.'

'What you do?'

He lit another cigarette. 'I'm a quartermaster. You know, steer the bucket.'

'Bucket?'

'Yeah . . . yes, the ship.'

'Oh.'

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'That's right.' He watched the smoke from the cigarette drift up to the ceiling.

Afterward: 'That's a nice picture on the wall,' he said.

'Yes. That's Zojo-ji Temple, Shiba Park, Tokyo.'

'Yeah. It's nice, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Yes. Nice.' He studied the uppers of his shoes. The room was beginning to warm. It was grand sitting in front of the fire. She was very very beautiful. Very beautiful. He put the cigarette out in the ashtray on the table by the chair. 'Ah . . . ah . . . you know Japan?' he asked quietly.

She stood up. 'I think I have bath.'

'Yes. Sure. Go ahead. Help yourself. There anything else you want?'

'No. No thank you.'

He watched her go into the bathroom and close the door. She was very very beautiful.

Afterward he heard the shower rush against the water-proofed curtain. He wondered why she had the shower

before the bath. Then he remembered something someone had told him somewhere about the Japanese not using soap in the bath. They soaped and washed themselves first then soaked in almost boiling water afterward.

He lit a cigarette and sat back in the deep chair. He wanted to do something for her. He liked that name too. Reika. That was a beautiful name—Reika. A very beautiful name for a very beautiful girl. He noticed the telephone on the table by the veranda doors. He went across and picked it up. It buzzed and a voice said: 'Desk.' He asked if a bottle of saki could be sent up. The voice said it would, and he went back to the chair and took his shoes off and sat with his feet up in front of the fire. There was no sound from the bathroom. Someone knocked on the door and it opened and the boy came in. He was smiling. He put the tall bottle of saki on the table by the chair.

'You bring glasses?' Varne asked.

'Yessa,' the boy said and went back out the door. He came in with what looked like a porcelain urn with a tray on top. He put it between the chairs.

'What the hell's that?' Varne asked.

'Heat saki. Must heat saki, si.' Two small cups were on the tray. He took the tray off the urn and put it on the table. A grid covered the top of the urn. Varne leaned over and looked inside. Inside the urn glowed a charcoal fire. Much heat came off the fire. Varne paid for the saki and told the boy to keep the change.

'Hey!' said Varne as the boy went out the door.

The boy stopped. 'Yessa.'

Varne motioned him back into the room. 'Where you live?'

'Wanchai, si.'

Varne inclined his head towards the bathroom. 'Ever see her before?'

The boy shook his head vigorously. 'No. No see.'

'Sure?'

'Yessa. No see. New gil Hong Kong. No see.'

'All right,' said Varne.

'Yessa,' said the boy and went out.

Varne got up and went across and looked out between the curtains. Outside it was raining heavily. Across the street to

the left was a neon sign that said: Tienstien Bar and the light changing from green to yellow to red and the rain falling different colours through the changing light. The inside of the veranda windows were beginning to steam up. He closed the curtains as the bathroom door opened. She carried the cheongsam and wore a blue towelling robe. It was too big for her. She had the sleeves doubled back and the hem dragged out on the floor.

'You look cute.' Varne smiling.

She smiled, then saw the bottle of saki and porcelain urn.

'It's raining out,' Varne cut in.

'Oh, no!' she said. 'You buy saki.'

'I thought you might like that. You don't mind?'

'You're very kind. Very kind.'

Varne went across and looked out between the curtains. 'You know, it's raining out.'

'You want I warm the saki?'

'Warm it?' said Varne turning.

'Yes. Warm it. You drink it cold if you want.'

'Which is best?'

'Warm. Yes, warm. Much nicer warm.'

They sat and drank the warmed saki. The girl sat cross-legged on the carpet in front of the fire. The drinking was very pleasant. She told him it was made from rice. Varne thought it amazing what could be made from rice. The saki reminded him of hot whisky toddy.

'I should very much like that cigarette now. Please.' The girl with the cup in both hands and smiling. He gave her the cigarette and lit it for her. 'You always smoke American cigarettes?' she asked.

'That's all I could get. Honk's suddenly gone Yank.'

'This war has done that. Have you been to this war?'

'Not yet.'

'I suppose you still to go?'

'We haven't gone yet, but it's probable.'

They drank in silence for a while. The girl sipped from the cup held in both hands and stared at the fire. Varne stared at the girl. She was very beautiful sat there in that too big bathrobe. Suddenly she looked at him: 'You will tell me. Yes? Maybe now? You not pay. You very kind.'

'You're Japanese, aren't you?' Varne not meeting her eyes.

'Maybe you not want because I Japanese?'

'That got nothing to do with it. But tell me how come you're in Honk.'

'That interest you?'

'I been thinking about it.'

She sipped her drink, her eyes back on the fire. 'I came to Kowloon from Canton two weeks ago. My father died there early in the summer. Two months later my mother died of broken heart.'

'I'm sorry I . . .'

The girl went on. 'Now there is nothing for me in Canton so I come Kowloon.'

'And you haven't done this before either.'

She turned and looked at him, then sighed. 'I not do this before. Never,' she said slowly and quietly. 'But now—when first I come I have some money, now no longer. My friend tonight she brought me here to Hong Kong side. She say it all so easy. But I not know . . . I very glad it is you.'

'How about that frock?' Varne pointing to it on the bed.

'Girl-friend let me wear it. She say my clothes no good.'

Varne looked at the picture on the wall of the Zōjō-ji Temple. The girl sat in front of the fire, not moving. She was very beautiful. Her smooth and tanned and the bathrobe powdered blue: and it all so delicate, her on the floor in front of the fire, not moving.

'Where you learn to speak the English?' Varne quietly. Then, 'That's if you don't mind.'

'My father teach me. My father teacher of languages in Tokyo. Then we go to Shanghai, then Chungking. After the war finish we come to Canton. Now——'

'Yes. What you going to do now?'

'Maybe I save money and go home Japan.'

'You got all the right papers?'

The girl looked deeply into the fire.

'You got all the right papers?' Varne repeated.

'Nothing.'

'Surely you can prove it. You can prove you're Japanese. Can't you get the consul or somebody to help?'

'You not understand Hong Kong. Everybody want to prove they somebody. Too many people and not proof.'



'But can't you go home? They can't say you're not Japanese.'

'They believe I Japanese. They believe everybody. But they not do anything to help unless there is papers. Everybody must have papers.'

'Jesus Christ.'

'I have uncle in Davao in Phillipines. He is importer. I know he is there three years ago but he never yet reply to my letters.'

'But you can't do this. Not you. You can't hang around here.'

'Nothing else I can do. Too many people and not enough work.'

She poured more saki. Varne lit another cigarette. Outside the rain battered on the veranda.

'I think you better go to bed soon.'

She looked up at him. Her so delicate on the floor. 'Yes.'

'Yes. That's about the only suggestion I got at present. This world lives on papers. Papers and official stamps. Anybody knows that it's me. Christ it is.' And quietly. 'Now you go along to bed.'

She stood up slowly, looking at him, then went across to the bed. Varne stared into his drink. He heard her take off the bathrobe and lay it on the bed. She coughed lightly. Varne finished his drink. She was sitting up in bed with the silk cover up to her shoulders. She was very beautiful. She coughed. Varne blew his nose in his handkerchief. The girl sat watching him, then turned and faced the wall. Varne filled his cup from the saki bottle. Outside the rain beat on the veranda.

James Varne woke suddenly with a sore neck and both legs numb. He got out the chair and stretched himself. His mouth tasted foul. He wondered how long he had slept. He stood close to the fire, catching the heat coming up, then went across and looked out between the curtains. Daylight was beginning to come in. He was surprised to have slept that long. It was still raining. The wind had risen during the night and blew the rain in long gusts up the wet grey street. Across the street all the windows were shuttered against the rain. Everything was wet and grey and dead-looking. He turned away from the window and went across to the

bed. The girl slept. The cover had come down off her shoulders a little. She was very beautiful, her skin smooth and clear and tanned.

Varne went into the bathroom and rinsed his mouth, and afterwards had a bath. It was pleasant lying in the hot water. He thought about the girl and felt sorry it was morning and him going back aboard before dinner, and it raining too. He turned the shower on cold after the bath, then dried himself and dressed and went back into the room. The girl was still sleeping.

He went downstairs and had breakfast in the restaurant. The same waiter was on duty. He seemed quite pleased to see Varne again. Tipping means much to a waiter. The restaurant was empty. Varne ate four eggs and bacon and mushrooms. Afterward he had toast and coffee, then a second pot of coffee and smoked the last of the Camel cigarettes. Things did not seem so bad sitting there feeling well-fed and with pink walls all round. The rain did not seem so bad either from the windows of the restaurant. It was the rain that made things so miserable up there in the room. Rain had a way of doing that. He paid for the breakfast and ordered and paid for another breakfast to be sent up to the room when called. He bought a packet of English cigarettes at the desk in the lobby and was about to go upstairs when the lift boy came in with the morning papers. He bought the *South China Morning Post* and the *Hong Kong Tiger Standard*. The boy took him up in the lift.

The girl still slept. Varne sat and read the newspapers and smoked. Most of each paper was written in English. There did not appear to be anything very interesting. Front page was the latest report from Korea. There was fighting in and around towns and villages, and on hills and plains, and you had never heard the names of any of them before, and you did not know the brigades or regiments or ships, or anything: and this war could have been nowhere near to any place you had ever heard mentioned. Then the communists had been shelling Formosa for three days now. Formosa was a lot nearer and you had heard about it, but that was the communists on one side and the Americans and nationalists on the other, and it had nothing at all to do with anyone else. Those Americans would lend anyone a hand who was

fighting the communists, whether fighting successfully or not: and usually it was not very successfully. Then the cartoons written in Chinese. Chinese cartoons would never be printed in western newspapers. They were quite obscene and drawn in great detail; and it did not matter very much whether you could read Chinese or not.

'Good morning.' She lay watching him read the newspapers.

'Good morning. How you feel now?'

'Nice. Thank you. Wonderful. Didn't you sleep?'

'Yeah . . . yes.' Correcting himself. 'I slept all right. It's a lousy morning. Raining. Rained all night. It's bad now. I've been down for breakfast. You want yours now?'

'No thank you. I could not eat breakfast.'

Varne standing. 'You got to eat.' And going across to the phone and asking for it to be sent up.

'You are very kind.' The girl smiling.

'You just stop in bed and have breakfast.'

'But you spend too much money already.'

Suddenly: 'What you doing today?'

The girl paused. 'Oh, maybe I go see girl-friend.'

'And if you don't find anybody tonight?'

The girl was silent. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and a waiter came in with the breakfast tray and set it on the table by the bed.

Varne sat and smoked and looked through the newspapers while the girl ate. Two coffee cups were on the tray and when the girl finished eating, Varne sat on the edge of the bed and they drank the coffee. It was nice to be near her. She was very alive and very beautiful.

'Id like to help you,' said Varne quietly. 'You got to get organized. You got to know what you're going to do. You can't do this.'

'But you cannot do this. No.'

'You got to let me help. You don't know where you're going to end up. You got to let somebody help.' The girl was quiet. Varne went on. 'You got to let me help. It wouldn't be much. You might say American financial aid.'

'What you say?'

'It's all right. But you'll let me help.'

'I don't know. You are so kind.'

'It wouldn't be much—but you could stay here in the hotel. I get five days leave on Sunday. I could see you and take you out and——'

'You want to do that? Take me out?'

'Of course I do.'

'You're . . . you're very nice. You . . .' she smiled. 'You not tell me your name yet.' She laughed and was very beautiful laughing. She had a wonderful laugh.

'Yeah . . . well, that's me all over,' said Varne grinning. 'Jimmy. Jimmy Varne. And I'll call you Reika.'

'I like you very much, Jimmy.'

'I like you too,' said Varne. 'Then it's all fixed?'

'But I not stay here. This too expensive. We get nice flat for only twenty dollars. Here forty. Very nice flat off Nathan Road. You stay with me.'

'I don't want anything. You just got to have some help.'

'You promise to stay—you can help.' The girl smiling.

'Well. . . .' Varne rising. 'Now you get dressed. I thought about something else. There's a barber shop downstairs. Come down when you're ready.'

James Varne went downstairs to the barber shop. The barber had just finished shaving him when the girl came in. He looked in the mirror and smiled at her. She stood in such a way as to get the splits of the cheongsam to hang together, but the cheongsam was too tight, and she was very selfconscious about it, and of all the leg showing. It was still raining. Varne got the Chinese at the desk to phone for a taxi. He saw on the clock over the desk that it was only ten minutes to nine. 'I'm sorry I got you up so early. I thought it was much later.'

'I not mind. I glad.' She smiled up at him and stood very close. The lift boy came in from the street door and said the taxi was outside. They went out and the boy opened the taxi door for the girl. Varne spoke to the driver then got in the back with the girl.

It was raining very heavily and the rain on the roof of the taxi and rising off the street in the wind. The streets were very quiet and they drove fast uptown to the Central District. Varne sat watching the shops. Suddenly he touched the driver on the shoulder. The driver slowed the taxi, turned, and drove back a little way. Varne pressed four

fifty dollar bills into her hand and pointed to a shop window. 'See that one? The white one. You get one like that, eh?'

The girl sat looking at the money and paying no attention to what Varne said.

'I cannot take this. Please, Jimmy.'

'You get it. You get the lot. Everything you need. A cheongsam like the white one,' he said pointing at the shop window.

The girl looked through the rain at the window. 'No I . . .' she faltered.

'You can. You're going to. Hey, John! You know any bars around here?'

'Yessa. Coq Bar. Velly good bar.'

Varne to the girl. 'When you finish shopping get a taxi to the Coq Bar. All right?'

'But——'

'Never mind but. Go on.' He opened the door and pushed her out into the rain. 'Get everything you need. One like that. The white one.'

She stood in the rain looking at him, then the taxi started, and they left her standing on the pavement watching the taxi disappear in the rain.

The Coq Bar was in an alleyway off Queens Road East. Varne hoped Reika would find it. He was surprised when he opened the door. It was a pleasant bar and not what you would expect to find in an alley, and all mirrors and white stucco work and huge bright coloured paintings of cockerels on the walls. Along the far wall was a row of booths with carved partitions. Covering most of the floor was a scarlet carpet with yellow cockerels. He sat on a stool at the bar and asked the barman for a beer. The barman wore a white coat with a red cockerel on the breast pocket. He poured the beer. The beer was very cold. Stamped on the glass was a cockerel. James Varne wondered why they called it the Coq Bar.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when the girl came in. She stood in the doorway with an armful of parcels, looking very flushed and happy. She saw him and came across, smiling, and Varne took the parcels from her and laid them on the end of the counter. She smiled at him all the time.

'What you drink?' he asked.

She stared thoughtfully at the array of bottles behind the bar. 'Iced lime, please,' she said and sat on the stool beside him.

'An iced lime and another beer,' he told the barman. And to Reika. 'How did it go? You get the white one?'

She smiled very sweetly that wonderful smile. 'Yes. Yes, thank you so much, Jimmy,' she said and put her hand on his. Her hand was soft and cool. He put his hand over hers and held it tightly and they smiled at each other, and the barman had to cough and shift the glasses around before Varne remembered to pay him. Afterward: 'You get the white one? Like with the lace on top?'

'Yes. I get the white one. It's beautiful. And shoes too. And other things,' she smiled. 'I never know anyone like you, Jimmy. Except my papasan. You very much like papasan.'

'No. I'm not anything like that. Don't get thinking about things like that.'

She moved her hand in his. 'Why you do all this, Jimmy? I not believe it all happen.'

Varne awkwardly: 'Well . . . well, it's simple. I'm an anarchist. You know what an anarchist is?'

'I not sure. Maybe it is to do with no government.'

'You sure?'

'I not sure. Maybe.'

'That must be like the Reds then. They got no government?'

'I not know,' she laughed. 'Maybe they call it something else. Why?'

'Well you see a fellow I know knows all about things like that and he said I was an anarchist and an anarchist was a Red, so if a Red's got fifty bucks and you got nothing, he gives you twenty-five.'

'You think so?'

'Why? Aren't the Reds no good?'

'You should know. You fight them now.'

'That don't mean they're no good. Oh, no. Last time we fought the Fascists. They're still around. Before that we fought the Americans. They're still around. Before that it was the Spaniards. They're still around too. We're always

fighting somebody. It doesn't mean because we fight the Reds that they're no good. When it's all over they'll still be around too.' Then: 'You leave Canton because the Reds were no good?'

'I never thought about it that way. There was nothing for me there any more. I come to Hong Kong because I thought maybe it is easier to get home.'

'What about those chink refugees?'

'Everyone has a reason. But I not think they all come here because they not like the Reds. Refugees go to China from Hong Kong too.'

'They don't write that in the newspapers.'

'China newspapers write what they want. Hong Kong newspapers write what they want.'

'That's the world. You like the Reds?'

'They all right. They all right here too. Only many people wear many uniforms.'

'Yeah. Where they fall down is trying to make people accept their ideas.'

The girl smiled and sipped the iced lime. Varne going on: 'There you are. It's all a fiddle.'

'You are very funny boy.'

'It's this uniform. Everybody's different with a uniform on. I'm funny. Some people are serious. Some a lot worse. I guess I'm just lucky.'

A Chinese came in off the street, shook the water from the plastic raincoat he wore, and hung it on a peg by the door.

'Jimmy. What time you go back ship?'

Varne looked at the clock behind the counter. 'I better go now. I won't have time to go over Kowloon with you. Will you be all right?'

She smiled. 'I be all right. When you see me again?'

'Sunday. I'll be ashore Sunday one o'clock. Can you meet me at the dockyard gate?'

'I meet you. I meet you Sunday at one o'clock.'

'You'll need money for this place in Kowloon,' said Varne getting inside the pocket inside the flap of his trousers.

'No. I still have enough money.' Varne looked at her. 'Honest, Jimmy, I have.'

He put a fifty dollar bill in her hand. 'You better pay it

out that just the same. You'll need food and things. I'll be awfully hungry.'

'No, Jimmy. Please.'

'Go ahead. I'm a Red remember. A good one.'

'You joke me.'

'What about?'

'You a Red.'

'I'm not joking.' Varne straight-faced.

The girl quietly. 'You so good, Jimmy. I not worth all this.'

'I think so. I think you're worth a lot more. You're worth a whole lot more than just money, Reika.' They held hands, and looked at each other, and did not speak. Then Varne noticed the clock. 'I'll have to go now, Reika. You'll be all right?'

'Yes, I be all right. I think about you. I wait for you Sunday.'

Varne carried her parcels outside and called a taxi to take her to the ferry. She sat in the back and put the parcels on the seat beside her. They looked at each other, she smiled, and he closed the door and the driver let the clutch in and the taxi moved away and she put her hand to her lips then waved out the back window. Varne stood in the rain and watched the taxi drive down the street, thinking about her so beautiful and tiny and alone, and he loved her very much.

James Varne thought about Reika all day. It was very miserable with the rain too, blowing across the harbour and over the lock gates and sweeping the decks. They wore oilskins and stood inside the E.R.A.'s workshop. The first and second dogs was a quiet watch. All evening the wind blew in high gusts and drove the rain across the harbour and through the dockyard. Most of the time Kowloon was only a grey shadow in the grey rain. Sometimes when it rained



more fiercely Kowloon could not be seen at all. James Varne thought about Reika all the time.

When they went off watch they went down to the mess for supper. Supper was beans on cold fried bread. As they ate everyone in the port watch talked about the coming leave. Sparky was still under punishment. He was going to miss two days of the leave. He was miserable about that. Crutch told him to cheer up and think about the money he would save. That made Sparky more miserable and he started cursing everyone and everything between this world and the next. When supper was over the duty cooks tidied up for rounds. Lieutenant Parfet and Petty Officer Walters took rounds. Varne was very tired, and afterward he lay down and went to sleep on the locker cushions. The bos'n's mate on watch shook him at ten minutes to midnight for the middle watch. It was cold in the mess. He lit a cigarette and found his oilskin and went up top.

The rain had stopped but the wind had not fallen and it was very cold with the wind blowing down off the hills on the mainland. The clouds were low in the sky and hid the black mass of the Peak on Hong Kong. Across the harbour showed the lights of Kowloon, and the reflection of the lights on the underside of the clouds. Walters was still on deck. He made a jug of pusser's cocoa in the galley and they stood inside the E.R.A.'s workshop out of the wind and drank the cocoa.

'Where you going for leave?' Varne asked.

'Oh, I don't know,' Walters said. 'I've thought about any amount of things I want to do. But will they be done? That's the question. I think I'll take Worrall into the hills.'

The boy stood quietly sipping the cocoa and paying no attention.

Walters grinning: 'You hear that, Worrall?'

'How about what?' the boy asked.

'You and me going into the hills.'

'Humph!'

'And what does: "Humph!" mean?'

'It means I wouldn't go with you.'

'So you're going with somebody else?'

'He's got a townie in the Army,' Varne said.

'He has?' And to the boy: 'So you're taking up with the

Army?' The shore telephone rang. Varne picked it up and brought it inside the workshop. It was Reika. Her voice sounded very sweet and faraway. She was calling from the flat. She was sure he would think it a nice flat. She remembered the name of his ship and the dockyard exchange had put her through. She thought about him very much. She thought the call would be a nice surprise. He told her again he would be ashore at one o'clock. She said she would meet him at the dockyard gate. He did not want to say too much and she seemed to understand. They said good night and Varne said he was looking forward to seeing her again and she said good night and he said good night again and she made a sound with her lips and he said good night again and the line went quiet. 'Good night,' he said, and hung up. James Varne felt very grand and it could have blown a blizzard for all he cared.

'Well, well, well,' said Walters. 'Pushed-in face going all mushy. What's she like?'

'She's beautiful.'

'There's no need to ask what you'll be doing over leave.'

'What makes you think we're all alike?'

'Women. Oughf!'

'What's wrong with them?'

'They go bad every month.'

Varne looked out the screen door. The rain had started again, blowing in the wind down off the hills, and the lights of Kowloon fading in the rain.

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Next morning it had cleared. The wind had gone down and the sun was shining. By noon the air warmed and the city in the sun looked well after the rain. The harbour was quiet and the water blue under the clear sky, but still a little choppy, and it broke white on the hulls of the ferries and on the brown anchor buoys. As the liberty men went ashore a

liner of the American President Line came in from sea and was tying up on the Kowloon side.

James Varne went ashore with the rest of the liberty men. They walked through the dockyard in a crowd. Varne walked so he would reach the gate before the others. He saw Reika standing by the railings as he came up the roadway past the accommodation block. She was even more beautiful than he remembered her. The white lace cheongsam under the short pink cashmere coat and the very high-heeled white shoes: and her tanned and the thick black hair upswept and pinned with combs. She saw Varne and smiled and waved. The rest of the liberty men coming behind Varne started to whistle and hiss. Varne ran the last few steps, took her arm and got into the first taxi in the rank outside the gate.

Seated in the taxi: 'I'm sorry about that,' said Varne.

The girl smiled. When she smiled, her eyes smiled too and seemed to change depth. 'I understand. Not worry.'

'Where do we go?'

'I not know,' the girl still smiling. 'I think I make you something to eat. You say you be hungry.'

'No. No, I was only joking yesterday. I'm not hungry.'

The liberty men were coming out the gate and looking at them in the taxi.

'Hey, John! Tiger Balm Gardens.' And to Reika, 'That all right?'

The girl smiling: 'Yes. I go anywhere with you.'

'I thought maybe you hadn't been there.'

'No. I not been there.'

The driver headed down Wanchai. They passed the liberty men making to the Fleet Club. The liberty men made a great show, cheering and shouting and making rude signs as the taxi went past.

Varne coughed and studied the back of the driver's head. 'I'm very sorry about that.'

'Never mind. I not worry.' She smiled again and sat close, so beautiful and small and delicate and smelling so wonderful.

'What's that scent?' Varne asked.

'You like?'

The taxi passed Rediffusion on the left and came on among the higher buildings in Johnston Road.

'Yes. It's wonderful.'

'That's cherry and sandalwood,' said the girl. 'I so glad you like.'

Varne put his arm up to go around her shoulders, then changed his mind and put it along the back of the seat. She looked up at him and put her head back on his arm and smiled and sat close, and he sat close, and they sat very close and looked at each other, smiling, and the taxi sped through the busy sunlit streets of downtown Wanchai and hearing the noises of the people and the traffic and smelling cherry and sandalwood and charcoal smoke and camphor and rosewood, and the heat in the taxi and on the leather of the seats.

Tiger Balm Gardens were on the side of a rocky red earthen hill. The gardens were very beautiful. There were miniature buildings and wooden sculpture of all kinds, and in general the gardens were maybe meant to convey a short history of the Chinese people, but with Reika so close and happy, James Varne would not have sworn as to just what the gardens were really meant to convey. Afterward they sat on a low wall overlooking the city, white and hot and the trees green on the busy streets, and ate frozen sweet-milk shaped like bears off sticks.

They sat in the sun till late afternoon, talking and looking at the city below, and at the harbour, blue in the sunlight, and the high brown, shadowed hills on the mainland beyond. When the heat started to go out of the sun, they took a taxi back uptown, and Varne went into a tailor's shop and bought a pair of blue trousers and two white shirts and a sweater, and changed in the shop and carried his uniform away in a paper bag. He felt good wearing civilian clothes again, and being without the uniform.

Afterward they walked across to Central and went into the Coq Bar and had a drink and listened to the band that played in the evenings. They found a seat in one of the booths and watched the people come in. Most of the people were Chinese who appeared to be quite comfortably placed in life. Many of them had wives or girls with them. They talked loudly and had gold and inlaid teeth and wore American cut clothes. Some of the sailors aboard the *Homage* were beginning to call Hong Kong Little New York.

About seven o'clock two barmen lifted and carried away part of the carpet in front of the band to reveal a small dance

floor. A little while after a large party of American tourists came in the bar, the men talking loudly and smoking cigars, and most of the women wearing bright-coloured dresses and wide-brimmed hats with fruit or flowers as decoration.

'Here comes Covent Garden,' said Varne.

'Covent Garden?' said the girl. 'What you mean?'

'Never mind me. Have another drink?'

The girl drank iced lime. James Varne had another small beer. The bar grew quite noisy. The Americans had been drinking before they arrived and some were quite drunk. He became aware of three women off to one side of the counter staring at them and talking among themselves. Two of the women were in their mid-thirties and handsome-looking, and the other was a young girl, pale complexioned, with long blonde hair and very pretty. The band started playing again. *China Night* was still popular. They were almost finished their drinks when one of the women came across to the table. She looked at the girl then smiled. 'Willya dance with me, hon?'

Reika looked up at her.

'She doesn't dance,' said Varne.

'Who's asking you?' the woman said. 'C'mon, hon. You don't have to drink with him to have a good time.'

'Go and dance with the trumpet player,' said Varne. 'It might be more interesting that way. Go on, take your bag and lump it.'

Her eyes looked on his, then she turned suddenly, and started back across the bar.

'Would we like to go eat now?' Varne to the girl, the blue of those eyes softening.

'You very hungry, yes?' The girl smiling, and answering her own questions Japanese fashion.

Over the other side of the bar the women were talking together and the pale-faced blonde girl looking the way of Reika. Two women and a girl.

'We'll find someplace quiet to eat,' said Varne forgetting about the women and the girl, and rising to his feet held out his hand to the girl.

'No. We go home now.' The girl rising. 'I make something. I cook well. All Japanese girls cook well.' The girl smiling. 'We leave now, Jimmy. It was very nice. It is nice bar.' The girl looking around the bar.

She had a way of making Varne feel good, and not getting embarrassed for her.

They left the Coq Bar and walked down to the front and took the ferry. A chill breeze came up the harbour from the channel from the sea and they sat inside, holding hands and watching the lights of Victoria fall away, and the darkness of mid-harbour with the breeze on the water, and the lights of Kowloon getting closer. Outside of the ferry landing, they took a taxi and drove out past the Peninsula Hotel and turned up along Nathan Road. The road was wide and with trees either side on the pavements, and the many shops and hotels with lights in the windows and people on the pavements walking in the light under the trees. They sat close together in the taxi watching the lights and the trees going past, and going home.

Along Nathan Road on the left was an Army barracks, dark and ill-lit, and with high iron railings around the front lawn, and soldiers with rifles stood on the outside of the railings. Across the roadway the small Blue Peter Bar. The bar out of bounds to servicemen. The few times James Varne had bothered to go across Kowloon he had ended up in either the Blue Peter Bar, or the Red Lion, or Jimmy's Palace way down the other end of Nathan Road. Down the side streets the opium dens and whorehouses. The whorehouses where you paid your money and the mamasan clapped her hands and all the whores appeared as if by magic and lined up along the hallway wearing only brassieres and pants and giggling and posing and you walking along the line till you found one the shape you wanted. All that for five bucks and an alarm clock in each cubicle too.

The block of flats was a little way past the Hollywood Hotel, on the opposite side of the road, on the corner of a street running back off Nathan Road towards the hills. Varne paid the taxi off. The lobby was clean and smelled of polish and joss sticks and the white walls were hung with framed mirrors. No one was about and Varne followed the girl upstairs. The flat was on the second floor. There were two rooms, a bathroom, and a small kitchenette. The sitting-room furnished with a mixture of eastern and western furniture. By the fireplace a wicker couch and two chairs, and an old armoire with a sunfaded mirror set back against

the far wall. Two light bulbs with waxed paper shades hung from the ceiling, and high in the ceiling, in the middle of the room a large fan hanging stationary like a giant spider.

'We are now home. You like, yes?' The girl pleased with the moment and smiling.

Varne looking around. 'Yes. Yes, it's fine. Fine.'

The girl took off her coat and put it across the back of the couch. 'Sit down, Jimmy. I make something to eat.'

A pile of old magazines lay on the floor by the fireplace. Varne put the electric fire on and sat in one of the chairs and looked through the magazines. The girl brought a small folding table and set it by the fire. She smiled and went back to the kitchenette. Varne went on looking through the magazines. The girl brought a tray and set plates on the table. The smell of cooking food reached the sitting-room. The girl came through from the kitchenette and said, 'You eat now, yes?'

'Oh, yeah—yes.' Varne looking at her. 'Yes, we'll eat. What you got there?'

'You tell me if you like first.'

They sat on the couch close together with the table in front.

'I have wonderful dish next. After you have coffee, yes?'

'Yeah—yes.' Varne eating. The food was very appetizing. The prawns were deep fried and with boiled rice and vegetables cut through the rice.

'You like?'

'It's great. Really good. Prawns?'

'Yes. Prawns. Japanese call tempura.'

Varne smiled. 'It's very nice, Reika.'

Afterward she brought a large bowl filled with what she called chawanmushi. Chawanmushi was chicken, pork and beef steamed with egg custard. When they finished eating, Varne put one of the lights off and they sat on the couch in front of the fire drinking coffee.

James Varne had just finished his cigarette when someone knocked on the door. He sat up and watched to see who it was when the girl opened the door. He was an Indian, tall and wearing a grey European-cut suit. The girl asked him in, and he stood, not looking at Varne, and slightly embarrassed while the girl closed the door. Varne stood up. The

girl took the Indian by the arm and walked him across towards Varne. 'Jimmy. This Mr. Saadik. He own flats.'

'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Saadik,' said Varne and held out his hand. The Indian took his hand. 'My pleasure. I assure you, my pleasure.' He coughed lightly and looked at the package he carried. 'I . . . I brought this for you,' he said to the girl.

'Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Saadik,' said the girl and took the wrapping off. It was a bottle of liqueur.

'Lor Mai Tsao,' Mr. Saadik said.

'It is very kind of you,' said the girl. 'You must sit down and have a drink with us. Must he, Jimmy?'

'Yes. Yes, you have a drink.'

'Thank you very much. It is so kind of you both.' He was somewhere in his middle fifties and with that dark Indian handsomeness. The girl came back with glasses, and poured the liqueur. Varne offered him his cigarettes, then they drank. The Lor Mai Tsao was a nice drink.

'I am most glad when Miss Reika come back to flat yes'day. I am most worried about her. It is really great relief. She is very happy and she tell me all about you, Mr. Varne. All this you have done. When Miss Reika first come here I like her very much. Very wonderful girl, yes. When her money finish I tell her, "Stop here, never mind money." Maybe I get her job in Indian store. But—psssst! She gone. If I have money. Flats! Flats all right. But this flats not good enough for Europeans and too good for Chinese. I use flats other way—but then I rather be not wealthy than have bad conscience.'

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'I just don't know. I can't think of anything yet. But I'll be out here another year and all I can do is get her some money so she can live decently till maybe something turns up. It's not so easy, but I might think of something.'

'Yes, I understand. Yes, clearly. Always someone somewhere with problem.'

'It'll work out somehow.'

'Yes. I hope very much. Well,' he said finishing his drink, 'It has been nice to meet you, Mr. Varne. Both of you. I glad you both happy anyway. Things never so bad when one can be happy. Good night. Both of you, good night.'



When he had gone they sat close together on the couch and held hands and drank some more of the Lor Mai Tsao.

'Seems a nice fellow,' said Varne.

'Yes. He is. His wife very kind too. Last time I give him my rent his wife give it back and say "buy food".'

'Don't worry about that, Reika. After this I'll make sure you get money every fortnight. I'll fix it that way. Through a bank or something.'

'No. You not do that. I must do things myself.'

'Of course I can. There's nothing I can't do. I want to do something I do it.' He put his arm around her shoulders.

The girl, her eyes on the fire. 'All this so wonderful.' Turning to Varne, 'I so happy. So very happy, Jimmy.'

'It's funny to come all the way round the world to feel this way. I never thought I would feel this way.'

'I feel that too.'

They kissed, and afterwards he sat with his arm around her and her head against his chest.

'I'll care for you, Reika. There's some way. It can't always be this.'

'Ssssh, Jimmy. Not talk. Hold me tight. Very tight. Jimmy, hold me, Jimmy.'

They kissed. He held her tight. Afterwards he looked down at her, her head on his chest, her so small and beautiful and fragile, and her hair against his mouth. 'I love you, Reika.' Softly.

'I love you, Jimmy.'

'I love you, Reika.' Her hair against his mouth.

'Tonight. Tonight.'

'No.'

'Yes, Jimmy. Tonight.'

'No.'

'Now, Jimmy.'

'You want it that way?'

'Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.'

'There's no——'

'Now.' Her voice a whisper. Her head on his chest and her hair against his mouth, the hair smooth and smelling of sandalwood, and she sat that way, her eyes closed, and her so small against him.

Next morning it was bright and warm early in the morning. Outside the sky was cloudless and the hills beyond the city brown and green and clear against the bright sky. After breakfast James Varne and the girl went across to Victoria to take the ferry to Macao. The ferry left a little way down harbour from the ferry for Kowloon. They had to fill in some forms and have them passed by the immigration authorities before they were allowed aboard. After they were aboard a Chinese immigration officer came aboard and spoke to the girl. He had the forms with him and they spoke rapidly in Cantonese, the officer gesticulating with the forms. Suddenly he turned to Varne and said, 'This lady with you?'

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'The lady's with me.'

'You see. So many pape's. Says she Japanese citizen. She only have refugee card. Must be velly ca'ful about so many people.'

'We're coming back tonight.'

'That not the p'oblem. She not have alla pape's. Says she Japanese citizen.'

'What's that got to do with it? I said we're coming back tonight. You think we're trying to escape or something?'

'Many people have escaped to many places fo' many reasons.' The officer shrugging his shoulders.

'Well we're coming back tonight,' Varne looking the officer in the face with those blue eyes.

'May I see your identification again, please?' The officer smiling.

Varne handed him his paybook and passport. The passport was not really needed to enter Macao, but on the front was the coat of arms. A coat of arms can look very important and very official—without it really matters whose coat of arms. The officer studied them both along with the forms. 'Thank you,' he said and handed them back.

'All right?' said Varne.

'Yes,' said the officer. 'You will both be back tonight?'

'Yes,' said Varne. 'We'll both be back tonight.'

The officer smiled, bowed to the girl, and went ashore.

'What he say to you, Reika?'

'Much the same he say to you.'

'Probably thought we were criminals.'

'Oh, it his job. He not mean anything, Jimmy.'

'It's the uniform. That's what uniforms do. To hell with uniforms and papers.' Varne was very angry. Only when the ferry left the quayside did he feel a little better.

They sat in the saloon and watched Victoria from the long wide windows slipping past as the ferry steamed slowly down the harbour, the buildings very white and angular in the bright morning and people going to work along the front, and lorries and motor cars passing up and down, and lorries drawn up on the quay loading from the lighters brought in from the ships out at the buoys. Then they were through Sulphur Channel, with Green Island to starboard, and leaving Victoria behind to port. Outside of the sheltered water the sky was clear bright and the sea blue with a cool breeze from the south-east and the lightly ruffled water reflecting the gold of the sun and the rippling patterns on the inside of the saloon deck-head. Then the ferry rounded Soko Islands with the high humped Lantau Island beyond, brown and green and the blue water cutting cleanly in the sunlight on the rocky shore.

The ferry came slowly alongside the jetty in Macao. Ashore a crowd had gathered to meet the ferry and they stood chattering and waving to friends on board. Along the front were the hotels and shops with small grey stone arches out over the pavements. The buildings were smaller than in Victoria and mostly of Spanish and Portuguese design. Two Portuguese police officers came aboard and sat at a table by the brow inspecting the passengers' papers as they went ashore. The officers did not seem to be so worried about criminals arriving in Macao as the immigration authorities were of them escaping from Hong Kong. They wore olive green uniforms and had pistols in black buttoned-down holsters on their belts. They were large men and wore long sweeping moustaches and laughed and joked in Portuguese with some of the passengers.

James Varne and the girl had a wonderful time, the two of them together, and they went to the Praya Grande, and the Grotto of Poet Camoens, and in the heat of the morning

sat in the gardens and had iced tea, then visited the Guia Lighthouse, and saw the façade of the Cathedral of St. Paul: and went up to the Barrier Gate between the colony and Communist China and looked out at the land beyond, peaceful and green in the sunlight.

Late in the afternoon they left the coolness of the Kun Yam Tong Temple and had supper of roast pigeon in a restaurant on the Avenida Almeida Ribeiro, and watched the people walking along the pavements, and the traffic, and the soldiers marching past with the officer in charge riding on an old bicycle. They did not look very much like soldiers except for their uniforms. They did not really march either, just ambled along in a crowd carrying their rifles like walking sticks or umbrellas and laughing and calling to the people on the pavements: and the officer riding on the bicycle dismounting to talk to two pretty girls in lace shawls while the men went on down the avenue. It was very fine to see such an unwarlike army.

They sat in the restaurant till the sun started to go down and a cool fresh air come into the clear sky. The glow of the setting sun turned the white-walled Spanish buildings pink and cast black shadows of the trees on the walls and the windows of the buildings reflected the red and gold of the sun: and the Avenida Almeida Ribeiro, was very romantic as the sun went down. Afterward they walked back to the ferry, his arm around the girl and holding her close and feeling her walk against him in the dark; and them very happy and very much in love.

Next morning when the girl had gone out to the shops, James Varne had a bath, and afterward when dressing, someone knocked on the door. It was Mr. Saadik. Varne asked him in and offered a glass of the beer he had bought on return from Macao. They sat in the chairs by the fireplace out of the sun coming in the windows. The beer was cool and golden in the glasses.

'You will please forgive my intrusion?' asked Mr. Saadik.

'Yeah, of course. No intrusion at all.'

'May I ask if you have nice day yes'day?'

'Yeah, we had a nice day. Macao was a change from Singapore and Honk.'

'Yes. Too much of one place does not help it become fond to one.'

'I know what you mean.' Varne drinking.

'Is Miss Reika still out?'

'She won't be back for some time. Why? Is something wrong?'

'No, no, no. But I hope you will not be angry.'

'About what?'

The Indian breathed deeply then drank a little of the cool beer. 'Well, I think about Miss Reika and you—and I think of nothing for a time, then—pssst! I have meeting with old friend and I think I ask him some advice. You understand? This friend big business. Own large store.'

'What he say? This friend of yours.'

'Well, he say he not able to help much but he say he maybe know somebody who can. He ask me the name of your ship.'

'What that got to do with it?'

The Indian shrugged his shoulders and looked at the gold of the beer in the glass. 'Really I not know. I wonder too. Then he say if this gentleman can help he will call on you. I give him your address.'

'What's this friend of yours in—M.I.5?'

The Indian looked puzzled. Varne went on. 'So we got to wait for this other fellow to call if he can help?'

'No—I mean, yes.' The Indian breathed deeply again. 'Gentleman called this morning. Say you not wear uniform and be at Hi San Ylang's bar tonight nine o'clock. Alone he say.'

'It's the M.I.5. Where's this bar anyway?'

'Hong Kong side. Far end Wanchai. Do you go?'

'How do I know this fellow? Is he Indian?'

'I never meet this man.'

'There isn't much to lose.'

'Do you go?'

'I'll see. Another drink?'

'No. No thank you. However, if this business not what you

wish I hope you will not lay too much blame on me. I only try to help two people. I am most sorry I know nothing more.'

'I can try anything once. Even this. Far fetched as it is.'

'Well, if this gentleman calls again I say you be there, Mr. Varne?'

'Yes, Mr. Saadik. You can tell him I'll be there.'

'Now, I must go. My wife wishes me accompany her to Victoria. Ah! Such is life.'

Varne showed him to the door.

After lunch James Varne and the girl took the ferry to Victoria. The weather was very warm for the time of year and a dust rose off the busy Central streets. After a drink in the Coq Bar they took the cable car to the summit of the Peak. From up there Victoria was small and white in the sun, and the city strung out along the lower slopes of the Peak. Across the near-empty harbour was Kowloon and the surrounding hills, and the sea coldly blue in the sunlight, and junks, far-off in the Pearl River Estuary, and the sky clear in the sunlight and only thin cloud high up.

It was quite cold on the Peak, and after the sightseeing they went down to one of the tea-rooms near the cable railway and had tea. During tea James Varne told the girl there was someone he must meet in the evening. She did not question him, and said no more about the matter. Later they rode down on the cable car and went to the Liberty Cinema. The film was French, about a noble family back in the eighteenth century. It was a boring film and James Varne could not get the hang of the story. When he watched the characters he missed the sub-titles and when he read the sub-titles he missed the characters. In the end he did not think he missed very much whichever way he looked at it. After a while they just sat and held hands and forgot all about the noble French family back in the eighteenth century who could not even speak English.

It was dark when James Varne climbed out of the taxi outside Hii San Ylang's bar. From the doorway of the bar he looked onto the wide intersection of the roadway. On the hill overlooking the intersection he saw the lights of the shacks where most of the refugees lived. He went into the bar. It was small and with a stone-patterned floor and with white-topped tables back against the walls. The few Chinese seated at the tables looked up at him as he went to the counter. No Europeans or Indians were in the bar. He ordered a San Miguel beer and sat at the nearest table. He drank three more beers and drank his mouth dry, and no one had as much as looked at him again.

He rose and ordered his fourth beer and went back to the table. A Chinese coolie came in wearing a black shark-skin worksuit. It was almost ten thirty. The coolie sat at the table in front of Varne's. He sipped his beer then got a Chinese newspaper out his pocket. James Varne silently cursed Mr. Saadik and sat and smoked and stared at the shaven head above the newspaper. It was the lousiest bar James Varne had ever been in. The appointment should have been in the Luk Kwok Hotel. That way the time would have passed easier.

The Chinaman lowered the newspaper, stared at Varne, turned the newspaper over, and buried his face in it again. James Varne was going to sit there till he stared again then he was going to get up and go across and hit that Chinaman right out the door. Suddenly he lowered the newspaper a little and their eyes met over the top. Varne started to his feet—then stopped. On the top of the outside page directly beneath the Chinaman's eyes was scrawled in English: LEAVE FIRST. Varne sat back in his chair, finished the beer, and went out.

Outside he walked up the street a way, then stopped, and lit a cigarette. He saw the Chinaman come out the bar, look up and down the pavement, then cross the roadway. Varne followed, keeping the Chinaman in sight as he went on down the street to the right, then across the street, and down an

alley at the foot of the hill overlooking the intersection. The alley was dark after the street lights. Suddenly the Chinaman came out of the dark and touched his arm.

'Come! Come!'

Varne could make him out in the dark now. 'Where we going?'

'Come! Come!'

'Don't you speak any more bloody English?'

'Come!' said the Chinaman and pulled at Varne's arm.

They started up the hill. Above were the lights of the shacks, and after looking at them the face of the hill was darker than ever. Varne found it hard work climbing when he could not see what it was he was climbing, and large boulders were everywhere and the path between them, and falling sheer away in the dark. When they reached the first of the shacks Varne's shirt was stuck with sweat to his back.

Inside the shack they entered was an old woman wrapped in a blanket sat in front of a pot belly stove. She went on staring at the stove and not looking at them. A paraffin lamp lit the room. The room was almost bare, and rough boards and sheets of tin were the walls. The roof was very low and the whole place smelled of damp and cooking and the burning of the paraffin lamp. The Chinaman drew back a piece of sacking covering a door leading back into another room. Varne went through and the Chinaman let the sacking back in place, remaining with the old woman. The only furniture in the room was a large bed covered with a green cotton cover. On the bed sat a small well-fed Chinaman wearing rimless spectacles and a white suit and shirt and blue tie. He rose and held out his hand. 'Very pleased that you managed to come, Mister Varne,' he spoke very slowly, careful about the pronunciation.

'I waited long enough,' said Varne.

The man smiled. 'Let us say we have to be very very careful, Mister Varne. I humbly apologize for any inconvenience I have caused you.' While he spoke he continually dabbed at his round face with a blue silk handkerchief that matched the tie.

'As long as it was no joke,' said Varne.

'No joke, Mister Varne. No joke, I assure you.'

'How come you kept me waiting? You said nine thirty.'



I thought you'd have been particular about things like that.'

'As I said, my humble apologies, Mister Varne. But there are many things I have to know and trust first. No good business otherwise. No good business at all,' he said smiling and dabbing his face with the handkerchief. 'You want something—I want something, yes?'

'Could be.' The smell of damp was very strong.

'I see you are not accustomed to Chinese housing conditions. Can I offer you a drink, Mister Varne?' He brought a bottle of whisky and glasses up off the earthen floor and set them on the bed and poured the whisky. 'What you say? Bungho!'

'Cheers,' said Varne. The whisky took the taste of the damp out his mouth. The Chinaman refilled the glasses.

'You don't live here,' said Varne.

'Oh, but of course not. Shall I say it suits our immediate purpose. Please sit if you wish, Mister Varne. I deeply regret there are no chairs.'

Varne sat on the end of the bed, the bottle of whisky between them. 'Well?'

The Chinaman smiled. 'I take it you are very trustworthy gentleman.'

'I hold my own.'

'And with matters of the heart a gentleman is of best integrity, yes?'

'What you mean: "Matters of the heart"?'

The Chinaman refilled his glass again. 'Let us be perfectly frank, Mister Varne. We are completely in each other's trust.'

'Probably.'

'Mister Varne, I believe we very well might be of the greatest service to each other. I am in the position to help both Miss Mitsugami and yourself.'

'Miss Mitsugami,' said Varne looking at his glass.

'Please help yourself, Mister Varne,' said the Chinaman, and going on. 'First, I must be very careful. A great deal is entrusted to me. I cannot afford any mistakes. I am directly responsible to other most honourable gentlemen. Since we first hear mention of Mister Varne we have been most busy. It is regrettable perhaps—but very necessary. You will agree afterward. I promise. Now, I know many things about you

and Japanese girl-friend. We now feel that it is entirely up to you whether you wish to accept the help of our services or not. One will not pursue the matter should you refuse. If you accept and fulfil our proposition we can guarantee you both—Mister Varne, *both*—disappear together. That we can promise.'

'What I got to do, Mr. er. . . '

'Mister San,' said the Chinamai 'I wish you to take something for me to Japan. It is very simple. An errand you might say.'

Varne smiled. 'But I don't even know if we're going there.'

'You must excuse me, Mister Varne. But Chinese information very reliable. Your ship leaves for Japan on Saturday. First a ten day patrol in Formosa Straits—then Japan. Sasebo and Kure.'

'Well, well,' said Varne. 'That's something.'

'Yes, Mister Varne. That is something. I wish you to deliver this errand to Kure.'

'What is it? Can't you send it legit?'

'Well—no, Mister Varne. But it is quite safe for British sailor. Other British sailors and officers have done so already. Very safe, I assure you.'

'What is it?'

'First I make proposition. After you give decision. Yes?'

'Go ahead, Mr. San. I'm listening.'

'Miss Mitsugami will remain in house in Kowloon. You take this cargo to Kure for me and before you leave I deposit four thousand dollars in Miss Mitsugami's name in Dao Heng Bank. You check account before you leave. On safe delivery in Kure I am notified and deposit further four thousand dollars in Dao Heng Bank in same name. No one may touch money but Miss Mitsugami. Then when your ship finish Korean patrols arrangements can be made for you to bring something back if you are agreeable and for this I give—six thousand dollars. Not only that but I guarantee you both disappear. What you think, Mister Varne? You have fourteen thousand dollars and I arrange your passage to say—Philippines—free. You have passport?'

'Yeah . . . yeah, I got a passport.'

'Then you will leave your passport with me and I have

name changed with Miss Mitsugami as wife. If you have that in mind?’

‘Could be, Mr. San.’

‘Also I have Maersk Line sailor’s identity book made in same name. No one will throw you out Philippines. You are discharged merchant sailor with beautiful Japanese wife come to live happily ever after. Or you both go Japan. No one throw you out Japan either. It very simple. This can all be done. I as most honourable gentleman promise.’

Varne thought about it. Afterward: ‘Well, I don’t know. Sounds a bit too easy.’

‘Precisely, Mister Varne. Very easy. Absolutely no trouble.’

‘How come you got British sailors doing this?’

‘Oh, now, now, Mister Varne. Who inspects British sailors when they go shoreside?’

‘The officer of the watch, I suppose.’

‘Of course. And every merchant ship which arrives in a port is very very carefully inspected by Customs. British sailors *walk* ashore, Mister Varne.’

‘What you want me to take?’

Mr. San refilled the glasses then: ‘Gold.’

Varne finished his whisky and remained silent.

Afterward: ‘Well, Mister Varne?’

‘How do I know you’ll keep on the level?’

‘You will be able to see Miss Mitsugami’s account before you go. The rest you must trust till you arrive back in our honourable city. Please remember, Mister Varne, *you* carry the gold. You must trust me—I must trust you. After all, the gold is worth considerably more than eight thousand dollars.’

Varne filled his own glass from the bottle. It needed some thinking about. It sounded too easy. Far too easy. Mr. San’s eyes never left Varne’s face. Varne finished his drink.

‘Ten thousand dollars, Mister Varne. I am afraid I can go no higher. Five before you leave. Five when delivered.’

‘If you’re confident I’ll get it into Japan—I don’t see why not. Ten thousand.’

‘Ten thousand, Mister Varne. And if I not confident I lose most.’

‘All right. When do I collect and how do I get it aboard?’

Mr. San drank a little of his whisky. 'Too much knowledge of one thing not good for one. Understand, Mister Varne?'

'All right. But I got to know sometime.'

'I believe your leave expires midday Friday?'

'That's right.'

'Thursday morning Miss Mitsugami will sit in Golden City Restaurant for coffee by herself. She will have passport photograph and your passport. Very honourable gentleman will exchange bank book for photograph and passport. When you come back to Hong Kong everything is arranged for you to leave immediately. No one will trace you. Regarding our cargo, somebody will call on you. Understand?'

'Yeah. I'll remember.'

'Of course, I take it you have sense not to attempt anything foolish.'

'Reika's here isn't she?'

'Good. Also I should explain that all the while you are in Hong Kong after receiving our cargo someone will take care you are not molested. Please do not be disturbed if you notice honourable gentleman in your vicinity more than once. It is for your own good.'

'But what about the address in Kure?'

'Not worry about address, Mister Varne. But one thing more—please remove your shirt one moment.'

Varne looked at him that way. 'What for?'

'Please have patience.'

Varne stood up and took off his shirt. Mr. San got a tape measure out and put it around Varne's back and chest.

'Is that all?' Varne asked when dressed.

'You may leave now, Mister Varne. It has been a very pleasant meeting with a very honourable gentleman. Thank you.'

'Good night,' said Varne.

'Oh! One moment, please,' said Mr. San and handed him two one hundred dollar notes. 'Let's, shall we say—to meet immediate expenses.'

Varne put the money in his pocket and pulled the sacking aside. 'Good night, Mr. San.'

'Lee will escort you down. Do not worry about anything. Good night, Mister Varne,' he said and bowed.

Friday morning it rained hard. A wind had risen during the night and James Varne got up and pulled the shutters. They were up early and had breakfast. Outside it rained very hard and the wind drove the rain against the shutters. Varne got out the remainder of the bottle of Lor Mai Tsao and sat drinking it with beer chasers. He felt very bad about leaving the girl and sat thinking about going back aboard and hating the going back and the thinking about it. He wanted to get drunk and forget all about everything except the girl and nothing bad ever happen. All the while was the rain and the wind and the rain against the shutters.

'What's the time?'

The girl went through to the bedroom for the travel-clock. 'Nearly eleven, Jimmy.'

'Nobody turned up yet. I got to go in a little while.'

'Maybe they changed their minds. Maybe you not have to do it.'

'No. Something'll happen. They won't put this off.'

She came across the room and sat beside him on the couch.

'Oh, Jimmy. Jimmy.' Her head on his shoulder.

'It's just the waiting. Just the waiting. It's that what does it. I'll have to go soon.'

'I will miss you so much. So much.'

'I'll miss you. But think—where will we go after. Think about that. Let's think about that.'

'We go anywhere.'

'No. We got to think about that while I'm away.'

'As long as we go together.'

'You'll be all right while I'm away?'

'I'll miss you. I love you. I love you.'

He kissed her forehead, holding her close: and outside the rain against the shutters.

Someone banged on the door. They looked at each other. Varne went across and opened it. A coolie stood outside with a laundry basket on his head. 'Mista Vane? Washee, washee.'

'You got the wrong place.'

'Yessa, yessa. Yan Lee, washee, washee,' said the coolie and pushed past him into the room and put the basket on the floor.

'No, John. Not any washee, washee.'

'Yessa, yessa,' said the coolie and padded out.

When the coolie had left he opened the basket. Inside were carefully folded white sheets, and under the sheets a white canvas bodice the shape of a life jacket. He lifted it out. It was very heavy. He could feel the gold in strips sewn inside the canvas. He took off his whitefront and put his head through the hole at the top of the bodice. There were no sleeves and it tied at either side at the waist with tapes. It was very much like a life-jacket but not nearly so bulky, and if one went into the sea wearing it he would go down like rock.

He pulled the whitefront on over the bodice, then put on the collar and the jumper. The girl had to help pull down the jumper. The jumper was very tight but when he looked at himself in the mirror of the armoire there were no bulges. He felt a little awkward though with all that weight over his shoulders and he walked up and down the room a couple of times to get accustomed to it.

'Well, that's it.'

'You will manage?' the girl anxious.

'Case of having to,' said Varne. And smiling, 'I heard about people having dollar bills sewn in their shirts but never gold bars.'

The girl did not smile. Outside the rain still beat on the shutters.

'Well,' Varne looking at her. 'I'll have to go now. I don't feel so bad now it's happened.'

'You will have to go, Jimmy.' The girl sadly and meeting his eyes.

'Yeah.' He stood close to her, his hands on her shoulders. 'I love you, Reika.'

The girl near to crying. 'I love you.'

'I never knew what anything could be till you. I love you.' He kissed her. Her lips trembled. When he opened his eyes there were tears on her cheeks. 'Don't cry. Please don't.'

The girl crying now. 'I not help cry. I love you.'

'Please don't cry. Please. Makes me feel bad too. I want to remember you smiling. When I come back you'll meet me and you'll be smiling.'

'Hold me.'

She was very beautiful, crying, smiling, naked, she was very beautiful.

'I'll have to go, Reika.'

She sniffed quietly and tears rolled down her cheeks.

'Good-bye, Reika.'

'Good-bye. I love you.'

'I love you. Smile for me.'

She looked up at him, her eyes deep and the tears on her cheeks, and started to smile—then broke down.

He kissed her.

'Good-bye, Reika.' He turned away and could not look back. He closed the door quietly and went slowly down the stairs. Inside he felt all like hell. Near the bottom he stopped on the stairs and lit a cigarette. He did not feel any better as he walked out into the rain. He threw the cigarette in the street and saw it come apart in the wet. A taxi came down Nathan Road, and he waved. The taxi stopped and he told the driver the ferry, and got in and sat back. The rain swept up the road from the channel from the sea. The rain was very heavy and the buildings wet and the trees dark and whipped by the wind. Everything was grey and dead-looking and wet in the rain.

The *Homage* was out of the dry dock and lying in *Tamar* Basin when James Varne arrived back aboard. A little after three in the afternoon she let go, and steamed down the harbour to the danger anchorage and took on board ammunition from two lighters. The rain was very heavy and hid most of the harbour, Stonecutter's Island only a formless shadow, and lost at times completely. The work was heavy and even in the rain the sailors sweated in their oilskins. It was dark when the *Homage* steamed back up the harbour and tied up at No. 2 buoy. It rained all evening and no liberty pipe was made. It was a long lonely evening and James Varne missed the girl very much.

During the night James Varne took the bodice off and locked it in the bottom of his locker. Early in the morning an M.F.V. came out from *Tamar* and they took on board Korean clothing, leather knee-boots and dufflecoats and long pink woollen combinations. A little after seven they came away from the buoy and steamed slowly down Lei Yue Mun Channel in the still driving rain, leaving Kowloon to port only a grey shadow in the dismal morning.

Visability was poor outside and a rough sea was running east nor'east, and the *Homage* drove her bows deep in the long troughs and they started taking water immediately they were outside Tathong Channel. The weather was expected to worsen, and to the south a number of black hulled fishing junks were making heavy going of it for Tolo Harbour. The *Homage* drove on past Clear Water Bay and Port Shelter and the headland making Tolo Harbour, and steamed slowly into Mirs Bay. They dropped anchor in the quieter water, and the guns' crews closed up for exercise.

They stood huddled in oilskins and sou'westers round the mounting on the fo'c'sle and watched Crutch out on the wing of the bridge send morse ashore on the port searchlight. The wind was bad off the land and the rain drove straight off the sea. A faint blink of light answered the morse high on one of the hills westward of the harbour. 'A' and 'B' guns fired fourteen rounds and were secured, while 'Y' gun went on firing because of some error in the elevation. The sailors huddled in the lee of the mountings, and the sudden splitting cr-a-a-ack and the flash in the burnt cordite and the hissing whr-r-r of the shell going away and the rumbling echoes of the firing coming back off the hills all jumbled up and sounding like thunder very close. The shells could not be seen exploding nor the sound of the explosions heard. After the shoot *Homage* weighed anchor and went back out to sea to Formosa.

Ten days' patrol in the Formosa Straits in bad weather made a miserable ten days. The straits were miserable at any time. Even in good weather the sea did not run well. And shoreward the land was bleak and windswept and the heavy seas breaking high on the black rocks: and the long runs at low speed, turning point a little north of White Dog Islands, and the long run down and only the white broken seas thun-



dering over the fo'c'sle, and the wind, always the wind in the Straits.

The patrol finished, *Homage* altered course and steamed northward. The further behind they left Formosa the more the weather improved. The seas went down and the wind eased. The *Homage* steamed into the American Naval Base at Sasebo early in the morning before dawn and tied up alongside a steel jetty where beyond, close in under the round-topped hills, the fleet fuel storage tanks were. Immediately alongside the re-fuelling began. In the middle of re-fuelling dawn broke. The water of the harbour was flat silver blue and the hills dark shadowed on the nearside, round and black-outlined against the fresh pale sky and the sun a red ball and the clear-cut rays upstanding and spreading among the fading stars. The Japanese sunrise was very pretty and the land quiet and time unhurried: and James Varne thought very much about the girl.

During the middle watch the *Homage* passed through the port of Kobe. The city lay on either side of the channel. In the dark the many coloured neon lights of the bars and night clubs and hotels, and beyond on both sides of the city, the moon on the snows on the hills. Everything was quiet and pretty to look at. When the *Homage* had passed through Kobe speed increased, and afterward only the moon on the flat water of the Inland Sea and the water against the hull then threshing white in the wake in the moonlight.

When James Varne came off watch he stood amidships by the engine-room fans looking out at the moonlit water and the round snow-capped hills, smoking and waiting for the middle watchmen to turn in. Inside among the hills was no wind but the frost was very hard and showed white and sparkling on the superstructure. He had the hood of his dufflecoat up and it was warm inside and pleasant in the night.

Afterward he went down to the mess. Everyone was asleep and he undressed to the waist and unlocked his locker and took the bodice out and put it on. The strips of gold were cold and hard under the canvas, and he shivered. He dressed again and put on the dufflecoat and wrapped the blanket round himself and lay down on the mess table. Everything was battened down and the ventilators shut, the only heating a single electric strip on the after bulkhead. The air was very bad. James Varne lay awake a long time, then fell asleep thinking about the girl.

The jetty in Kure harbour was a sunken Japanese cruiser with the superstructure sheared away. The cruiser lay off the right hand side of the harbour, to seaward of the ship-building yards, and a bailey bridge connected it to the shore. The *Homage* was to be in Kure three days before sailing on her first Korean patrol.

Watchkeepers libertymen was piped at one o'clock. James Varne had worn the bodice all day and felt quite safe as Sub-Lieutenant Swanson made the inspection. Swanson barely looked at him and called to the petty officer of the day to dismiss the libertymen. Varne felt very relieved as he walked across the bailey bridge, and at the same time happy and thought about the girl and thought how it would not be long till they were together. Black uniformed police were on the gate but stood inside a low wooden hut and looked at the libertymen through the window.

The sailors went out the gate in a crowd. Motor taxis and motor-cycle taxis waited outside, and men, touts for the bars and clubs, handing out their cards. Most of the cards entitled a sailor to a free ride into Kure to the bar and the first beer free. It was a good way to do business. A number of sailors spent all their leave riding around in taxis and drinking free beers and not spending anything except in the whorehouses.

One tout went around slapping everyone on the back and handing them green cards. The sailors were looking at them, turning them the other way round and laughing. Varne stopped to see if anyone appeared to be watching for him. Suddenly he was slapped on the back by the tout with the green cards. Varne was so keyed up he almost swung on him. Outward the bodice felt like a steel waistcoat. The

tout bowed and smiled. 'Welcome Club Butterfly, sailor. Number one club. Free Ashai beer. Very pretty girus. Come. Make girus happy. Sailor Varne.' The Jap smiling broadly and slapping Varne on the back again. Varne looked about him, his heart beating up into his mouth. The tout made a great show of dragging him towards a taxi, shouting loudly about the amenities provided by Club Butterfly.

The taxi was old and painted grey and reminded Varne much on a box on wheels. The Jap drove very fast. The road was earthen and stretched out straight ahead white and dusty along the base of high gorse covered hills rising almost sheer off the harbour. James Varne felt tired. He lit a cigarette and held on with one hand to the strap above the door while the axi jolted along the dusty road at high speed. Now it was almost over. There would be ten thousand dollars when he got back to Hong Kong. With ten thousand dollars they could do many things. They could go to the Philippines, or Japan, or almost any place they wanted. They would go together. They would be very happy. Always. The driver shouted back over his shoulder. James Varne came back from a long long way away. 'What you say?'

'I say: Sailor Varne, Number one,' he shouted, turning around.

'For Christsake hang on the wheel,' yelled Varne.

'You worry?' the driver shouted back. 'Sailor Varne need plenty plenty Ashai.'

James Varne thought the road would never end. They started passing low wooden houses by the sides of the road, and above the road, and up the face of the hills were terraced fields. On one side of the road they passed a sign that said: TO NISIROKU. Then they were in Kure, houses and bars and people on the streets. Varne found he still had the Club Butterfly card. It showed a girl eating with chopsticks. When he turned it around she did something else with the chopsticks.

The taxi swung into the wide Nakadori, then down a street to the left, and across another, and out across the wide Hondori by the Bank Sumitomo on the corner. They stopped on a street of shops and bars running parallel to the road to Hiro. The driver climbed out onto the pavement

and opened the door to Varne. They were outside the Bar Tonkobushi. Varne looked around him. There was no sign of the Club Butterfly. He followed the driver inside. Except for the bar-girls sitting at one of the tables the place was empty. The driver slid a door open at the end of the bar and went through into a carpeted passage. The driver stopped and removed his shoes. Varne did the same, then they continued along the passage to a room at the end. The room was small. In the middle of the floor two old and very dignified Japanese wearing kimonos sat crosslegged by a fire pot. When they entered the two Japanese stood up and bowed then shook hands with Varne. One of the men wore a goatee beard.

'I extend very great welcome to my house, Mister Varne,' the one with the beard said. 'I trust you encountered no trouble?'

'No. No trouble. I'm glad it's finished with though.'

'I am most sure. You may remove the bodice now if you wish, Mister Varne. You will no doubt be most relieved to see the last of it.'

Varne had to get the driver help him get the jumper off. The old Japanese who had remained silent throughout left with the bodice with the driver.

'Please be seated, Mister Varne,' the one with the goatee beard said. 'Your needs shall be attended at once. You care for Jayapanese meal? Ashai, saki, cigarette?'

'I don't mind something to eat. Some sukiyaki or chawan-mushi if it's possible.'

'Ah, you have been Jaypan before, Mister Varne.' The Japanese beaming.

'No. I got a Japanese girl. We're going to get married when we sort some things out.'

'How wonderful, Mister Varne. Please accept my humble congratulations.'

'Thank you,' said Varne sitting on the floor on cushions.

The Japanese rising to his feet. 'Excuse me, Mister Varne. I shall attend to your needs at once.' He bowed and went out sliding the door shut behind him.

Varne sat looking around the room. The walls were covered with handpainted paper and a full-length window

opened onto the garden. A cherry tree grew in the garden by the door. The room was warm and James Varne sat on the cushions around the fire pot glad it was over and thinking about the girl.

The door slid open and a girl wearing a chrysanthemum flowered kimono came in and set a low table by the fire pot. She went out without speaking and came back with a tray with bottles of Ashai and Nippon beer and a bottle of saki and cigarettes.

'Thank you,' said Varne.

The girl looked at him for the first time and smiled and bowed and went out.

The cigarettes were Lucky Strike and had the yellow duty free American Armed Forces stamp on the packet. The beer was light and had a slightly wooden flavour. James Varne drank three beers before the girl came back with the bowl of chawanmushi. On top of the egg custard were laid deep fried prawns. Varne nodded acknowledgement.

The girl smiled and bowed. 'Papasan wish to know how tall girusan,' she said.

'My girl?' said Varne.

She smiled again. 'Yes. Buysan's girusan.'

'Oh.' Varne getting to his feet. 'About this height.' Indicating with his hand against his chest.

'Thank you, sir.' The girl bowing. Varne watched her go out.

He had finished eating when the man with the goatee beard came into the room, the girl following him and carrying a beautiful red and gold kimono.

'I trust Mister Varne will accept our humble gift for his Jayapanese wife to be,' the man said.

'Thank you,' Varne touching the gold embroidery. 'It's beautiful. Reika will be delighted. It's really beautiful. Thank you very much.'

Both the man and the girl bowed, and the girl went out with the kimono. When she had slid the door shut they both sat on the cushions by the fire pot.

'Mister Varne. I believe it has been mentioned that you might take something with you on return.'

Varne sighed and lit a cigarette. 'It was mentioned—but I don't feel like taking anything like I brought.'

'No, Mister Varne. It is nothing so bulky. Some small objects that hide easily.'

'In that case it's not so bad. But I wouldn't have done the same again.'

'Yes. I know how one feels,' said the man and put a sheet of paper on the floor. Varne looked at him. 'What's that for?'

'If you be kind enough to put your foot on there.'

Varne put one foot on the paper, and the man drew around it with a pencil then turned it over and did the same with the other foot.

'What you going to do with that?'

The man smiled. 'Shoes, Mister Varne. I will have shoes made for you—naval shoes, complete to regulation—only there will be a compartment in the heels.' He smiled again. 'Before your ship returns to Hong Kong it will be great pleasure if you call at Bar Tonkobushi.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes, Mister Varne. That is all. I will take care of everything before your return. And put your mind at ease, Mister Varne—word has already been sent to Hong Kong of your safe arrival.'

Varne rising, 'Well, thanks. I'll call back.'

'Thank you, Mister Varne,' the man said, and led him out into the passage. Varne paused to put his shoes on, and the girl handed him the kimono wrapped in a parcel. He said good-bye, and went out onto the street. The air was cold and clear, and smelled of charcoal smoke. It was pleasant walking. Many people were on the streets. Sometimes a taxi went past, the running of the motor sharp in the clear air. He came out of the side streets onto Hondori and walked towards Kure House. He crossed the wide earthen road to Nisiroku and went into the downstairs bar.

The bar was long and bare, much as a drill hall, and not like a bar at all. Long wooden tables were in rows down either side of the hall. Some of the sailors off the *Homage* were seated at the tables, and Australian soldiers, wide-hatted, and the brim up on one side; and over on one side of the hall a number of soldiers from a Scots regiment, sat drinking and looking very dour and stolid.

Varne ordered an Ashai beer. The girl who served him was

badly disfigured about the face. The mark was deep purple, covering the upper half of her face and running into the hairline. Varne tipped her very well. She smiled sweetly and went back down the counter to serve an Australian soldier. Varne laid the parcel on the counter and lit a cigarette. A Scots soldier stood a little way off and ordered two Nippon beers. The same waitress served him.

'Ye just come in, Jock?'

Varne turned his head. 'Yeah. For a couple of days.'

'Kure's all right, mate.' The soldier grinning.

'Yeah?' Varne with no interest.

'Yeah. I'll say,' said the soldier paying for the beers.

Varne saw the girl look at him, and he smiled, and she smiled very sweetly.

'Ye fancy that yin?' The soldier loudly.

'Fancy what?' Varne getting a little annoyed and wanting to be alone.

'That hairy. Oh, dinna worry about the face. She got that at Hiroshima. But ye dinna worry about that. She knows wi' a face like that naebody'll look at her so she makes up for it in her kip—cheap too. Christ, she does that. But dinna let her face worry ye. Ye dinna see it wi' the light oot.'

'No.'

'Christ no! There's naething else in the place can touch her at blanket drill. Go ahead, Jock. Get aff yer mark.'

'Yeah.'

'Glad t' help.' Winking. 'And mind an' pit the light oot.'

James Varne finished his beer and went out and walked down the earthen roadway. Most of the bars had loudspeakers out over their doorways, and the street was full of blaring music. Girls were patrolling the roadway in pairs and singly and calling to the men. There seemed to be an awful abundance of girls in Kure. On one of the side streets Varne saw the sign: Fukuyoso's Hotel and Turkish Bath. He went in and booked a room and asked for a call at six, then went down the hall to the bath-house. After the bath he went upstairs to the bar and had three Torres whiskies, then went to bed early. The room was warm and pleasant, but lonely after the day, and James Varne went to sleep thinking about the girl back in Hong Kong.

The *Homage* slipped from the jetty during the second dog. As she put about out in midstream the lights of Kure showed in clusters under the long sweeping black hills. The night was clear and stars sharp and changing colour in the frosty air. The water in the harbour was flat calm and reflecting the sky and stars. The moon came up when they were out in the Inland Sea. High on the hills were the snows, and along the shores lights of the fishing villages and, sometimes, the fishing boats close offshore with lanterns out over the sides. It was a nice night, and the moon was out, and the hills close and quiet.

Next forenoon they were out in the Korea Strait. The sky had clouded over during the early morning and a strengthening nor'easterly wind drove an uncomfortable sea. The ship was battened down and the guns' crews closed up at second degree of readiness. On the bridge extra lookouts were mounted, and all day the *Homage* rolled before the sea, shipping water down aft on the iron- and quarter-decks as the wind rose and the sky darkened.

By the first watch they were in the Yellow Sea with a force seven wind blowing, and steaming northward about six miles off the West Korean coast. The night was very bad out in the gun mountings and the sleet and snow drove in under the oiled canvas covers. The crew in 'A' gun huddled together up on the foot of the mounting and listened in the dark to the night: the wind and the roaring of the waters and sometimes a sea falling aboard as the bows dove deeply and sweeping back over the fo'c'sle and thundering over the gun. Sometimes the whole ship stopped, shuddering, struggling, before being suddenly flung upward, and the wind catching her and rolling her far over. At three o'clock in the morning the bridge reported hurricane force winds.

None of the sailors slept, and in the morning corned beef sandwiches were sent round by the galley crew. The wind was to northward, having veered a little from the east, and the towering white seas thundered over the fo'c'sle and rose high in the air to be whipped by the wind over the bridge. Late in the forenoon the snow came in the wind and hid the



seas except when they broke aboard. And all the while the sailors in the mountings huddled together from the freezing cold, and the water tearing through the mounting on the deck of the fo'c'sle.

The wind fell on the fifth day, then it snowed heavily for two days, but when the wind veered back to the east the snow blew only in occasional flurries. Then the rain set in, and finally the weather cleared and it froze. It froze so that giant icicles festooned the ship, and the decks and guard rails had to be cleared with hammers and axes. The *Homage* patrolled the same stretch of coast for nine days and the only shots fired was the salute to St. Michael each morning as dawn broke. That was merely to bring the frozen crews to life and clear the guns.

On the seventeenth night on patrol the sailors at their action stations were suddenly wakened as the *Homage* heeled far over to port and came round in a tight turn to the north. A long lazy swell was running and as speed increased water broke aboard and swept over 'A' gun on the fo'c'sle. The sailors sat wet and cold and miserable and wondering what the sudden change in course was about.

No salute was fired at dawn. They were close inshore to a ragged black coast with the grey sea snarling up the towering cliffs in great white sheets. Beyond the cliffs were long high hills and the broken ground showing brown and green through the frozen snows. Look-outs were on each gun searching the sky for aircraft. The weather was bitterly cold and the decks shapeless with ice, and the free ice frozen again after it had been broken from around the mountings. Suddenly the tannoy shrilled and the voice of the first lieutenant came across calling a list of names.

James Varne's name was amongst those called. There were twenty of them crowded onto the iron-deck abaft the

funnel. The chief G.I. broke them into two parties, one in charge of Lieutenant Parfet and Petty Officer Walters, and the other under Torpedo Petty Officer Green. They were informed they were going ashore as spotting parties for a bombardment. The communists had broken through in two valleys about five miles inland and some distance to the north. The hills on the coast were held by an American Infantry Division, but for some reason no one had been able to contact them to set up a spotting party.

The landing point was an evacuated village on an inlet in the cliffs. Lieutenant Parfet and his party were to spot from a hill some miles to the north, and Green's party from the south-east. When the bombardment was completed they were to return to the village and the motor boat would collect them. They were issued with American combat jackets, and wore knee-boots, and webbing with ammunition pouches. The gunner's mate issued the rifles from the starboard office passage. James Varne was with the boy Worrall in Lieutenant Parfet's party. They went around and climbed into the motor boat. Green's party climbed into the sea boat. Sparky was already aboard with a wireless set strapped to his back. They all crowded in under the canopy. A signalman named Whittacker climbed aboard with an aldis lamp and a battery slung across his shoulders.

'I see we all joined the bastard Army,' said Sparky.

'Yeah,' said Varne. 'Stopping aboard this bucket is bad enough but to hell with getting out and walking in this weather.'

'Never mind,' said Sparky. 'There's plenty of booze in them thar hills.'

'Who you kidding?'

'Heard it on the set last night. Said the pongoes were fighting the commies on the hills with booze bottles.'

'Rubbish!' said Smithy. 'The only booze in them hills is in tins and belongs to the Yanks.'

'Maybe Parliament's banned corned dog and giving booze instead.'

'Yeah?' said Smithy. 'The only thing they ban is matelots from whorehouses.'

'Yeah,' said Sparky. 'They want to get all them fat bastards out here to do the fighting.'

'You got something,' said Varne. 'Seeing they started it.'

'You'd never get them out the candy floss shops in Kure,' said Smithy.

'Forget it,' said Varne. 'Leave it to the B.B.C. They'll be saying how the cream of the Andrew are fighting on the hills with bottle-openers.'

'You mean we'll be sleeping in the bastard snow,' Sparky said.

'Wonderful,' Walters said.

'Christ! You here?' Smithy said.

'Anything for a free ride, dear.'

The motor boat hit the water in a surge of spray. Parfet crouched in under the canopy, his beard brown and bushy. They picked up the tow-rope on the sea boat and headed inshore.

The sea was more rough the closer they went in, but it was warm inside of the canopy and smelled of diesel. The combat jackets they wore were camouflaged green and brown and had hoods. James Varne pulled the hood up and tied the cord that laced the front under his chin. They entered the inlet and shut off and came alongside the stone jetty. There was no ladder and they had to make an upward jump from the roof of the canopy. A cold wind howled inshore smelling sharply of the sea and shore. When they had pulled the sailors in the sea boat onto the jetty, they ran towards cover of the houses. There were little more than a dozen, built of grey stone and with roughboard doors and shuttered windows. They formed into parties.

'Varne!' Parfet said. 'You stay with me. The rest of you I want in single file, about five yards between each man, no bunching. Parker and Whittacker follow on behind me and Varne. Petty Officer Walters behind them. Smith! You take up the rear. All right, let's go.'

The other party were already headed up the narrow road-way out of the village, the road cobbled, and their feet loud in the freezing air. Hills rose sharply either side of the road. About two miles from the village the road branched. One led to the south, winding up the face of a hill as it went, the other struck northerly along the floor of a valley between two high hills. Green and his party were well on their way to the south. As Varne looked after them someone on the

end of the line turned and waved. It was too far to tell who it was. He returned the wave.

Parfet and his party were strung out along the east side of the road. It was a dirt road, the dirt thickly covered with ice where the wind had blown the snow clear. They had to be careful walking, and put their feet down flat. The long sloped hills were boulder strewn and gorse growing thickly on the lower reaches, and coarse grass and brown earth showing through the snows near the top. The wind was bitter and blew the snow down off the hills in flurries. James Varne's face was numb and his fingers stuck out white and bloodless from his mitts. The metal of his rifle was frosted, and every time he breathed he felt the freezing air hit the inside of his lungs.

They walked along, strung out Indian-fashion, watching the hills and wiping, continually wiping the moisture from their cheeks and noses with their free hands. Nothing moved on the hills, and only the wind whipped the snow and flurried it down into the valley. Parfet turned around and nodded. Varne increased his pace, watching his feet on the ice.

'Seen anything, Varne?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all.'

Parfet scowled into the wind. 'Not a damn thing about.' His beard frozen with his breathing.

'I thought the Yanks were in these hills.'

They went on walking. The sky very grey and low.

'They'll be lying in their fox-holes.' Parfet very large and upright and his right hand on the butt of his revolver in its canvas holster.

'I hope they know we're on the road.'

'They should know by now. They'll have seen us a long time ago.'

'They haven't let on as yet anyway.' Varne, his eyes searching the snow-covered ridge to the east.

'Yes. Strange when you think about it.'

'You'd think they'd be on the road too. Or have trenches alongside it.'

The sky was growing very dark. To the north it was almost black.

'It's going to snow,' said Varne.

'It looks that way. The wind's getting up too.'

A low loose stone wall ran either side of the road beyond the ditch. It was down in places. Sometimes the high gorse grew out over the wall onto the road. The gorse was thicker as they went along. Where it was bare the snow had drifted behind the walls. They skirted three deep craters in the middle of the road.

'That's big stuff,' Varne said.

'Bombs,' Parfet said. 'Looks much like bombs to me.'

'I haven't seen an airplane the whole time we've been up the coast.'

Parfet looked at him. Varne had not said: 'sir,' since they left the ship.

'No. I guess you're right, Varne.'

'They look fresh craters too.'

They turned and looked back down the road. Smithy on the end of the line was just rounding the craters. Sparky had his head down against the wind, and the aerial waved around above him with the motion of the walking and the wind.

'Down!' yelled Varne.

Parfet was on the ground beside him. 'What is it?' His eyes wide.

'Up there. The east hill.'

They lay on the ice looking up at the hill.

'I see them,' said Parfet.

The figures had come out of the snow and disappeared into the brown of the broken ground of the hill. Varne turned his head and looked at Parfet.

'What you think?'

Afterward. 'I don't know. Most likely Yanks.'

'Think so?'

'What do you think?'

Varne looking back at the hill. 'I thought they would've had their trenches the other side of the hill.'

'Must be Yanks. They would have shot at us otherwise.'

'It would be some shot with a rifle from up there.'

'They'd have other arms. Not just rifles. Come on!' They stood up and looked back down the road. The sailors were bunched across it staring at Varne and Parfet like they were out of their minds.

'What . . . what the bloody hell are you lot looking at?' yelled Parfet. 'Get down on the bloody road!'

The sailors looked at each other, then Sparky went down on his knees, then his elbows, and lay like that with the wireless on his back, staring at Parfet like he could not believe what was happening. Parfet got the revolver out his holster and waved it at the rest of them. 'Not now you bloody idiots! Not now! Get on your bloody feet! Varne! Go back and tell those bastard lot of idiots to hit the ground when we do. Tell them when I raise my arm to hit the ground. And tell them to keep their bloody eyes open.'

They started moving forward. Varne passed on Parfet's instructions and went back up the line. He caught up with Parfet again. 'I think they'll be all right now.'

'We trust so anyway!'

'How far we got to go now?'

Parfet brought a map out the inner pocket of his combat jacket. 'About four miles. The road turns right around the base of that slope. We leave the road the other side.'

The east hill dropped the other side of the slope and rose suddenly to a bowl-shaped upsurge of rock and stone.

'Is that it?' Varne asked.

'Yes. That's it.'

'That's four miles!'

'Four miles of road—then the hill.'

'Christ! How are we supposed to climb that?'

'We've got to be in touch by 11.00. The others should be on their hill now. They'll start the bombardment at 0930.'

They walked along, not talking. It started snowing. Back along the line the sailors were marching with their faces screwed up against the wind and snow.

Suddenly: 'Jesus Christ! Look at those bastards,' yelled Sparky.

'Where?' yelled Varne.

'Way down the end.' Sparky yelling against the wind.

Varne saw them. Everyone saw them. Figures very small and moving rapidly down through the snows towards the bare windswept ground and the gorse. No one bothered to lie down on the road.

'There's hundreds of the bastards!' yelled Whittacker.

Parfet came back down the road. He had his revolver out, and rubbing the ice off his beard with his other hand.

'I don't think they're bloody Yanks,' Varne said.

'Neither do I,' said Parfet. 'Funny though. There's nobody moving on the west hill.'

The sailors had forgotten about the cold. They stared at the hills with rifles levelled and fingers on triggers. Varne felt his insides light and warm spit in his mouth. A heavy gust of snow hid the figures on the hill. Varne went across to the side of the road.

'You can't do that now,' Whittacker yelled.

'Hell I can't.' Varne going on with it.

'Christ!' said Sparky. 'All those commies coming over the hill and Varney goes for a piss.'

A little way down the road Smithy did the same.

'All right!' yelled Parfet. 'Everybody up here!' He went in close to the wall on the east side of the road. The sailors gathered beside him.

'Reed!' shouted Walters. 'Get over there in the ditch and keep look-out.' Reed crossed the road bent double and went into the ditch.

Parfet looked at those gathered around him. 'Walters. Varne. Smith. Worrall. I want you to go on down the road about a mile—where it swings out of sight—and take a look while Parker gets in touch with the ship. We've got to try and find out what's happening around here.'

Sparky had the earphones on when the four left, Smithy and Varne on the west side of the road and Walters and the boy on the east. They moved fast, crouched over, and watching the hills. The sky was very dark and flakes of snow blew down in the wind. Nothing moved on the hills and only the wind blew the gorse and drifted the snow behind the walls.

'Anything?' Varne shouted to Walters.

Walters shook his head.

'Same here,' shouted Varne.

'Might be the Yanks all right,' Smithy shouted.

'What they creeping west for.' Varne.

'Yeah,' shouted Smithy—then left it at that.

They went on along the road in silence. Ahead the road turned eastward and on the turn the slope above the road flattened out and there were bare trees and high green bushes growing out to the road. The four stopped, close to the ditches.

'What you think, Walters?' shouted Varne.

Walters looked at him, then shrugged his shoulders and looked back at the bare trees and green bushes. Nothing moved, and only the snow blew in the wind.

Varne crossed the road to Walters and went on forward a little way in a crouch, then stopped, and raised his head above the wall. Over among the trees in a dip on the slope showed part of a grey stone building. Through the bare branches he saw on top of the back gable a small belfry without the bell. He moved on to the turn in the road. The walls both sides were down and the stones scattered on the road and huge craters stretching four or five hundred yards on and over both sides on the lower slopes. Nothing moved, only the wind blew the snow, and the wind whipping the snow thickly in flurries. The snow had covered the ice on the dirt road now. Varne stood upright and waved. The three moved up very cautiously, crouched low close to the walls.

'What you creeping for?' shouted Varne. 'I'm standing aren't I? If they were going to shoot any bastard they'd have shot me.'

'There's a church over there,' said the boy.

The snow was falling more thickly now and they could not see the tops of the hills.

'You two go across and take a look there while Varne and I go along the road,' said Walters, his hand to his mouth. Smithy and the boy went over the wall the lower side of the craters. Walters and Varne passed the church from the road before the others reached it through the trees. The far wall of the church was down and most of the tiled roof.

'Somebody's been shelling hell out this part the road,' Varne said.

'Heavy stuff,' said Walters looking at the church through the bare trees.

They passed between two craters side by side in the middle of the road. In one two bodies lay face down in the frozen dirt and snow. One lay crumpled like all the joints were broken and the bloodstains between the shoulders had turned brown. Both wore steel helmets. Varne went down into the crater and turned the head of the broken one around with his foot.

'They're Yanks,' said Walters looking down into the



crater. Varne climbed out. 'I think we better get back and see Parfet.'

'We'll get the other two,' They went back down the road and in the narrow gateway to the church.

Smithy and the boy stood by the altar. Rafters and tiles were down on the smashed pews among the rubble. The wind blew the snow in the open wall and the place smelled of broken plasterwork and burnt cordite and fresh-splintered wood. Smithy beckoned them. They went over the rubble to the altar. A woman lay, her legs covered by rubble, to one side of the cross on the rear wall. She was in her thirties and wore a black dress open from the throat to the groin. Snow had begun to cover her. The skin on her body was as white as the snow. The nipples of her breasts were large and brown and risen up hard. No wound or blood showed.

'What you reckon?' said Smithy.

Varne turned her over. She was frozen and turned over in one piece making a slight wooden sound on the earthen floor. The back of the head was completely missing. There was no blood or mess and the bone shone cleanly. 'She been in here when they hit the place,' said Varne.

'She's chink,' said Smithy.

'A missionary or something,' said Varne.

Walters suddenly. 'We better get out of here.'

'Can't we cover her up?' said the boy.

'She's dead,' said Smithy looking at the boy. 'She don't feel the cold. Come on, or we might all be lying here stiff as boards.'

Varne went across and got two of the seats off the pews and put them across the body, first turning her over on her back. Smithy and Walters were in the doorway looking out at the road, and the boy watching Varne, and his eyes far away.

Outside the snow in the wind had thinned and the tops of the hills were seen again. They went out through the gate and turned back along the road. A loud cough-like explosion vibrated off the hill behind them. They stopped and turned. They were right out in the middle of the road. No one moved on the hill. Then the whuu-whuu-whuu-whuu and it getting louder.

'Down!' yelled Varne.

They all went down where they stood and suddenly the

mighty *Cruwoosh* and blast of hot air and screaming of splinters and raining down of dirt and rubble. Varne's ears were dead and his mouth full of dirt and snow. Whuu-whuu-whuu again. No cough this time. Varne rolled into the east ditch behind Smithy. The ditch was deep and filled with ice. The earth shook and rubble came in on top of them. The shell fell a little way behind.

'Mortars!' Smithy yelled. 'The next bastard here!'

He and Varne rose and scrambled along the ditch in the ice. At one point Varne's foot went through and it seemed a long time before he freed it. Smithy was ahead of him, crouched low and his rifle trailing in the frozen grass. Varne heard it coming and went down before Smithy. He went through the ice into water and mud. The explosion was very close, back about where they had been, in the middle of the road. The concussion snapped at the grass above their heads and slammed back off the wall with a sharp double crack. Someone yelled as the rubble fell. Varne peered through the grass back across the road. The boy was half out the ditch and yelling and tearing at Walters's arm that held him around the waist. Suddenly he tore away and ran across the road, scrambling over the wall and out of sight onto the slope of the west hill behind Varne. It was very quiet and only the wind blew and muffled the yells of the boy. Walters was up in the ditch watching him run. Suddenly the quiet was shattered with the deep metallic clunk-clunk-clunk-clunk of a heavy machine-gun very close and somewhere back of Walters. The bullets scrabbled in a mess of snow and dirt in the middle of the road about twenty yards back, straightened, and slowly bit back along the road in a wavering line towards Varne and Smithy, leaving a black track cut in the ice. Varne watched them unable to move. Each bullet smacking into the ice and dirt and ice thrown into the wind. They came on incredibly slowly, suddenly lifting from the road and screaming off the wall then thudding dully in the dirt on the slope the other side. The firing stopped, then re-started, sharp and short, and the yelling rose to a scream, then suddenly bit off, and it was very quiet and only the wind blew the snow in eddies off the road into the ditch.

The snow had begun to fall thickly again. Varne crouched in the ditch and searched the gorse back of Walters. Nothing

moved and only the thick green gorse blew in the wind through the falling snow. Smithy sat in the ditch staring at him. Then tensely, 'We better keep moving,' he shouted.

'Better in the other ditch in lee of the wall,' called Varne not looking at him.

'Don't cross here! Come on a bit for Christsake!'

Walters still stood in the ditch under the wall.

'Come on!' Varne shouted at him, then followed Smithy, crouching low in the ditch. He did not think anything more about the boy after he started moving. The foot that went through the ice was sore now and the ankle beginning to stiffen. Smithy was way ahead in the ditch now. They had covered about two hundred yards when a rifle cracked behind them. They were down flat in the ditch again. The only sound was the wind in the frozen grass above them. Varne held his rifle up where it showed, and waited. Nothing happened. He raised his head and looked back up the road. Walters lay across the wall their side of the road.

'Stupid bastard!' Smithy shouted. 'What he go after him for? He's dead too!'

Varne started back along the ditch.

'Don't go back!' Smithy shouted. 'Don't go!'

Varne went on along the ditch and to where the legs dangled. He pulled him down. He was dead. The bullet had gone in between the shoulders, ranged upward, and come out under his chin. He left him in the ditch and turned to go back. Then something suddenly made him want to go on, and he turned again and went over Walters on his knees and on a little way to where a limb of gorse fell across the ditch. He waited a little, then eased himself upward till he peered out at the gorse above the road where the slope began to flatten out just south of the church. He stood about twenty yards back from the wall on a small rise with his rifle at his shoulder and watching the ditch the other side of where Varne pulled Walters down. He wore a green quilted coat and trousers and hat with ear-flaps and a scarf across his mouth. All that showed between the hat and scarf was the eyes and nose.

Varne slid the muzzle of the rifle through the grass, and sighted him, and slowly squeezed the trigger, and fired and the man let go his rifle and was flung backward very sud-

denly. Just like that. Shot him. Varne went back into the ditch and scrambled forward in a crouch, not looking at Walters as he went over him. Smithy had gone on. He went on along the ditch. He continued in a crouch till he thought he approached the point where Parfet would be. He stopped and searched the road. There was nothing except the snow and the snow falling. He remained in the ditch and went on.

The ditch was full of stones off the wall at places and continually changed depth. He kept stumbling and falling and his underclothes stuck to him with sweat. The pain in his ankle had now reached his knee. He stopped every few minutes and cautiously searched the gorse beyond the east wall above the road. Nothing moved and there had been no more firing. For some reason he no longer wished to cross the road to the other ditch. The fall of snow had eased but the wind felt stronger and at times blinded him with the snow it flurried off the ice. Suddenly a loud locomotive roar was overhead, followed quickly by three heavy explosions close on each other, and the explosions cracking back down into the valley. Varne moved forward and the roar came again. He stopped and peered up at the east hill. Near the ridge the shells exploded, three of them, one after the other and very close, sending fountains of brown dirt up through the white snow into the wind to be whipped across the snow in long brown clouds. The roar came again immediately after the tailing off of the echoes of the explosions. This time they fell lower down the slope.

James Varne's leg was very sore and he suffered a stitch in his side. He closed his eyes and wiped his face with a handful of snow. It felt like grit. He wondered how far ahead the rest had gone. He had made good time and thought he could not be far behind them. He went on again, having

difficulty in forcing his right leg forward. He stopped, breathing deeply and wiping sweat from his face with the back of his left hand. He looked on down the road. The snow had stopped completely. No one moved on the road. He wished to hell he could see someone. It was bad on your own. Then he wanted to get up and run run run down the road. Overhead came the roar, growing as it went on over. He did not watch where they fell. Someone, black against the snow had risen from the ditch about a half mile ahead and crossed the road from west to east. Then he saw the figures in the ditch under the east wall. They were ahead. Smithy was ahead with the others. Then a ragged coughing muffled by the wind and the stretch of road where Smithy had crossed suddenly lifted into the wind, and overhead the roar of passing shells that now surely came from the *Homage*, then the loud cries and yells whipped down by the wind from the north. Back along a great length of the road men were leaping over the east wall and running across the road. Immediately a coughing and heavy machine-gun fire broke out back on both hills. Overhead came the roaring of heavy shells and the twisting, sighing, whuu-whuu-whuu of mortars in the down-wind. The noise and all the yelling was very loud and James Varne could not think and could not move, and all he did was kneel in the ditch and look back up the road. The road thick with men leaping and running and falling. James Varne rose and ran, and running and not feeling he was running, blindly, along the road, and all around the noise and the yelling and the cries of dying. Then the whuu-whuu-whuu-whuu and he was into a ditch as the explosion lifted the road behind. They were all in the ditch, Parfet, his beard bloodied and open eyes staring into the grey sky, and Smithy, half out the ditch: and the others unrecognizable. James Varne lay among the snow and ice and bloodied dirt smelling of burnt cordite, and was sick. Terribly sick.

Then someone shouting: 'Jesus. Jesus Christ. Help me. Help me get my arm out. Oh, Jesus help me.' It came from further down the road. James Varne crawled over the bodies and parts of bodies trying not to look at them. Someone moved in front of him. He lay face down in the ditch with his left arm pinned under a large boulder. Varne put both

hands to it and pushed. The man screamed as it rolled off. Varne grabbed him and hauled his face out of the mud and water.

'Sparky! Sparky! I . . . I thought you were gone too.'

'My arm! My arm!'

'Take it easy. You hit any place else?'

He lay back vomiting dryly. Then afterward: 'My arm. How's my arm?'

'It's broke. But you'll be all right You will. Can you walk?'

Sparky clutched his left arm and did not move.

'Come on. Try and walk,' said Varne. 'Come on. Try walking.' He helped Sparky to his feet.

'Wait! Wait a minute!' Sparky knelt in the ditch with his face buried in the frozen grass.

'What happened?' said Varne. 'Why did you pull out?'

'We got word,' Sparky, his face in the grass. 'The Yanks pulled out to the west last night. Nobody knew. The Yanks didn't know about us. Nobody was giving their position away. We walked into it. The bastards! Dumb stupid bastards! My arm gone too. Christ! Oh my Christ! I——'

'We'll have to move,' Varne cutting in. 'We got about a mile back to the village.'

The fighting was fierce back up the road. They stumbled along the ditch, Varne out front watching the ditch and occasionally looking back up the road.

'Look! Up there, Varney! The Yanks!'

On the west hill, silhouetted against the grey sky were shoals of men moving back, and shells bursting among them, and around the bursts men falling. The attack had come between the dip in the east hill and the bowl-shaped up-thrust of rock. The soldiers falling back on the hills were about two miles behind them. Then the snow came, thick and white and falling heavily, and everything was lost except the sound of the firing.

They came down the road into the village in the snow as a green Verey light flickered up in a wide looping arc out to sea. Behind them the gunfire was muffled in the heavy snow. Up ahead rifle-bolts smacked home.

'It's Varney!' Varne shouted. 'Varne and Parker!'

'Who else?' someone shouted out of the snow.

'Nobody else!'

There was silence, then Petty Officer Green and Flashback came out of the snow. 'You all that's left?' asked Green.

'We got caught in the attack on the road,' said Varne.

'We got a direct hit top of the hill,' said Green. 'We saw the attack start above you. We spotted it till we were hit.'

'And you?' said Flashback.

'Never had a chance,' said Varne.

'My arm. I got my arm broke,' said Sparky. 'The bastards!'

'It's all for nothing,' Green said.

The noise of the gunfire was getting louder.

'It's hotting up,' said Varne.

'They got a lot of heavy artillery the other side of that hill,' Green said. 'Really heavy stuff. They got spotters working that hill you were going.'

'What's happened to the bucket?' asked Varne.

'She can't see now. There's all them Yanks up there too,' said Green. They moved down to the shelter of the houses at the head of the jetty. A heavy sea was sweeping in the inlet and thundering over the jetty, the spray flung high in the air and whipped away with the snow in the wind.

'It's bad out there,' Varne searching the seas through the snow.

'I hope the boat's going to manage in,' said Flashback.

'She'll manage,' said Green.

'I hope they send it,' Flashback scowling.

'They see us in all this snow?' said Sparky clutching his arm at the shoulder and it hanging there at his side.

'It's thinning,' Green said. 'I'll give them another Verrey.'

'I hope it doesn't thin too much,' said Flashback. 'They might start dropping them at the boat.'

'You want to make your mind up,' Green said, then walked out clear of the house, the gun held above his head, and fired. The green light went up in a cloud of smoke. It went high, carried downshore by the wind, then down out to sea. The fall of snow was thinning rapidly, and as they watched and waited the visibility cleared enough for them to look out to the mouth of the inlet; and the high grey seas thundering over the black rocks either side of the inlet and the seas boiling and white and up high to the crests grey and the troughs dark and deep and the wind tearing the crests away.

While they watched the motor boat suddenly swung high up on a sea to the north of the inlet and fighting her way in with the bows headed north and the engines full ahead.

'He won't make the jetty,' Varne said. 'We better go round to the north side where the bank slopes. He'll be in the lee of the hill there. We can go in the oggin one at a time and he can pick us up.'

They looked towards the north side of the inlet. Part of the hill shelved in an undulating roll to form the headland, and low at one point it fell to the water in a mass of shingle.

Green nodded and turned and set out along the hill behind the houses at the head of the jetty.

'What about my arm?' said Sparky.

'Let's have your webbing-belt,' said Varne, and took his belt off and lengthened it and put it back around him with his arm pinned inside. 'You come in the oggin with me. I'll see you all right.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. Come on.'

They went out into the wind and headed round the other side of the inlet. As long as they watched for the icy rocks in the long grass the going was not too bad. They waded through the knee-high grass and slid down the icy rock face at the tip of the bank to where the shingle fell away to the water. They had only gathered themselves when came the plummeting locomotive roar down the hillside. They went down the rest of the way in a heap to the freezing surf as the bank above them erupted in a sheet of flame and covered them with dirt and rubble.

'They've seen us! They've seen us!' yelled Flashback and ran through the surf and dove into the sea. The boat was inside the rocks in the calmer water.

'Come on!' Sparky yelled.

'It's an overshoot,' yelled Varne. 'They can't see us! Christ they can't!'

The cox'n was out in the stern of the boat and hauling Flashback aboard. Green was more than half-way out to the boat and swimming well, his head right out the water.

'We'll walk out as far as we can,' yelled Varne at Sparky staring at the hill. He took him by the good arm and they



walked out till the weight of incoming water threatened to throw them over on their backs. He grasped Sparky by the collar of his combat jacket and turned him over on his back and kicked off. The water numbed him to the bone and dragged at his clothing. Sparky kicked out well but the water was bad for swimming and with all the weight Varne was having a hard time with his breathing on account of being so low in the water. He cursed for not kicking his boots off before going in. It seemed he had been swimming hours when his head crashed against something hard and immediately Sparky was torn from his grasp. He saw feet disappear over the gunn'el above him then someone grabbed him by the back of his jacket and almost choked him. Next he knew he was on top of Sparky in bottom of the boat and him screaming at him to get off his arm.

He got up and fell in under the canopy past the stoker and lay on his stomach spitting up water. The engine was running loudly. He put out his hand and touched the engine casing, feeling the vibration and smelling the hot diesel. He felt good to be aboard a real boat with a real engine and going away from all that on shore. The sound of the engine drowned all else. The boat was pitching heavily and water pouring over the canopy and in under the gratings. He turned over on his back with one hand on the engine casing and the other on a brass handle inside of the canopy. The sky and the roof of the canopy were pitching and the cox'n hanging onto the tiller and staring ashore.

'What you waiting for?' Green yelled from for'ard inside the canopy. The cox'n lowered his head and peered inside. 'What about the others?'

'There's nobody else.'

'No?' said the cox'n.

'No. Get moving.'

The stoker revved up the engine without waiting for the cox'n's order.

Flashback quietly: 'I left my rifle ashore.'

'What good's a bastard rifle?' yelled Green.

Outside the inlet the seas seemed tremendous in that little boat, and Varne sat up and wedged himself against the casing and the canopy. Sparky had got himself over the starboard side and was holding to the casing with his good arm. Water

slopped deeply in bottom of the boat and the diesel reflected red and gold and blue in an oily film.

After a while he saw Sparky was unconscious and Flashback holding him from being thrown about. The sea was running from the north and the cox'n had the bows headed north-west. The boat went into corkscrew roll each time it rose to a sea. Now the water did not come aboard so much.

Astern the hills were still very large and very close. The whole boat was filled with the roar of the engine and they no longer heard the firing nor saw anyone move about.

'Where's the *Homage*?' yelled Varne.

The cox'n ignored him and watching the seas and leaning hard on the tiller to bring her bows round to meet them.

'She's coming from south,' yelled the stoker.

They were about a mile and a half off shore and still headed north-west. Already Varne could see from over the stern that the drift and wind had them about a half mile south of the inlet.

'She's here!' yelled the cox'n and pointed, then swung to watch the seas.

The stoker yelled something and was grinning. The three survivors looked at each other and grinned and all the while Flashback held onto the unconscious Sparky.

The cox'n was yelling and pointing but the wind whipped his words away and Varne rose and got a grip of the brass handrail over the canopy and looked southward. They topped a sea and he suddenly caught sight of the *Homage* zig-zagging to southward about a mile away. Suddenly water spouted white in two towering columns astern of her. She swung to starboard—then port—and ran, her high raked bows cutting cleanly and savagely through the seas.

'The bastards!' yelled the cox'n. 'The lousy bastards!'

Green thrust his head out beside Varne.

'She's being shelled!' yelled Varne into his face.

Next time the boat rose a column of water shot up ahead of *Homage* and went slowly down over the fo'c'sle and 'A' and 'B' gun-decks as she came through.

'That was close,' yelled Varne.

The cox'n nodded, eyes on the *Homage* again altering course.

'What'll she do?' Flashback with his head above the canopy and Sparky lying across the engine casing.

'Whatever it is she won't stop for us,' yelled Green.

She was coming fast now, and zig-zagging, and them watching her from the boat when it rose in the sea. She heeled over and came sharp around to starboard. They saw the men at the guns and the men on the bridge. Her speed was up and her cleaving the seas and the water thrown up sweeping aft over the bridge. Overhead came the shells, the roar growing loud above the noise of the wind and sea. She was not returning the fire. The boat went down in a trough. Suddenly the exploding of shells, low and booming and the underwater crack. They rose on the next sea and she was swinging away to port, her head just taking on, and the white columns of water going down slowly along her starboard side. She would pass about three hundred yards ahead.

'She's not stopping,' yelled Flashback.

'We'll keep heading out,' yelled the cox'n into the wind. 'She'll pick us up when light starts to fade.'

Overhead was the growing roar of shells.

'That's heavy stuff,' Varne.

'Told you they got heavy stuff the back the hill,' yelled Green to his face. 'They got spotters working the shore-line too.'

She was right ahead, the men on deck by the guns and the men on the bridge. Someone on the bridge raised an arm. Then the low boom and the crack and water climbing white and high alongside the fo'c'sle for'ard of 'A' gun. Then two more, sheeting water high alongside aft by the sick-bay. Then as the boat started to slide away, the empty sounded bursting of metal and the vivid yellow light on the waterline underside of the flag-deck. And when they were down the mighty cra-a-a-ack and whooshing of air and water as the for'ard magazine exploded and the blinding flash, red and orange reflected in the sky and water all around and the screaming of debris loud in the wind, and them coming up and the flash dying and only white broken water and smoke and the smoke choking them—no sound and like being in a

vacuum, and all this so quick—and a hurtling sensation and the hot scalding breath on them and them not hearing anything and the boat standing on end and them in the frozen water inside of the canopy and something hit Varne in the face and swallowing blood and water and no air and him clawing and kicking to get from under this thing on top of him. Everything was black and cold and suffocating, and he came out into a blinding light, chest crushed, and choking, and caught hold of a manila fender on the hull of the upturned boat above him. No one was near him. He shouted, but there was nothing but the rushing water and the wind. Then Sparky broke the surface some yards away, facing toward the upturned boat, his eyes opened wide.

‘Sparky! Sparky!’ Varne with both hands on the fender.

The eyes fixed on him.

‘Sparky!’

The eyes were still fixed on him, wide and strange-looking.

Varne leaned away from the boat, his hand outstretched.

‘Sparky! Here! Over here!’

The eyes never left him, and the one arm feebly began to thresh the water, then stopped, those eyes still on him and the mouth open; and now the water closed slowly over the open mouth and the eyes and the head, and the arm lifted and slowly sank beneath the sea.

‘Sparky! Sparky!’

He did not come up again. No one came again.

Now it was so cold he could not feel himself, and there was only the water and the wind and all around the cold, and those eyes, still fixed on him, wide and strange-looking; and he was alone and began to shout—but no words came, and there was only the wind and the water and the cold.



